



当代藏人短篇小说  
Contemporary Tibetan Short Stories

བོད་ཀྱི་དེང་རབས་སློབ་གྲྭ་

Contemporary Tibetan  
Short Stories

AHP 53



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*ASIAN HIGHLANDS PERSPECTIVES 53*



Contemporary Tibetan  
Short Stories

*Introduction*

by

Lauran Hartley



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HARD COPY: [www.lulu.com/asianhp](http://www.lulu.com/asianhp)

ONLINE: <https://goo.gl/JycnYT>

ISSN (print): 1835-7741

ISSN (electronic): 1925-6329

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008944256

CALL NUMBER: DS1.A4739

SUBJECTS: Uplands-Asia-Periodicals, Tibet, Plateau of-Periodicals

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CITATION: 2019. Contemporary Tibetan Short Stories. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 53.



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*ASIAN HIGHLANDS PERSPECTIVES*

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*Asian Highlands Perspectives (AHP)* is a trans-disciplinary journal focusing on the Tibetan Plateau and surrounding regions, including the Southeast Asian Massif, Himalayan Massif, the Extended Eastern Himalayas, the Mongolian Plateau, and other contiguous areas. Cross-regional commonalities in history, culture, language, and socio-political context invite investigations of an interdisciplinary nature not served by current academic forums. *AHP* contributes to the regional research agendas of Sinologists, Tibetologists, Mongolists, and South and Southeast Asianists, while also forwarding theoretical discourse on grounded theory, interdisciplinary studies, and collaborative scholarship.

*AHP* publishes occasional monographs and essay collections both in hardcopy (ISSN 1835-7741) and online (ISSN 1925-6329). The online version is an open-access source, freely available at <https://archive.org/download/AsianHighlandsPerspectivescollectedVolumes>. The print edition is available to libraries and individuals at-cost through POD publisher Lulu.com at <https://goo.gl/rIT9II>. The journal currently has a core editorial team of three members and a consultative editorial board of experts from a variety of disciplines. All submissions to the journal are peer-reviewed by the editorial board and independent, anonymous assessors.

*AHP* welcomes submissions from a wide range of scholars with an interest in the area. Given the dearth of current knowledge on this culturally complex area, we encourage submissions that contain descriptive accounts of local realities - especially by authors from communities in the Asian Highlands - as well as theory-oriented articles. We publish items of irregular format - long articles, short monographs, photo essays, fiction, auto-ethnography, etc. Authors receive a PDF version of their published work. Potential contributors are encouraged to consult previous issues.



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## INTRODUCTION

Lauran Hartley (Columbia University)



*Y*ou will be scared of me if I tell you the truth," Grandmother replied gently. With these words, a doting relative begins to recount the sad and heretofore untold tale of her youth to our boy narrator.

Storytelling, in its most immediate sense, is at the heart of this poignant collection *"Contemporary Tibetan Short Stories,"* which merits our appreciation and enjoyment in many ways as the literary fruit of what Lama Jabb (2015) has coined the "oral continuities in Tibetan literature." More than two dozen young writers from the Tibetan Plateau have probed their most tender memories and curious encounters to pen tales with characters and circumstances that fascinate, puzzle, disappoint, or leave us pained.

Each story is prefaced by introductory remarks from the author describing their inspiration, and many draw on actual occurrences, however surreal. This framing lends an "embedded" effect to several of the works: stories are nested inside stories, sometimes within a yet wider narrative. As these young adult writers prompt their respective elders or friends for details, we are reminded of the *vetāla* cycle (Tib. *ro sgrung*), by which the carrier of the narrative (and of a story-telling corpse) is irresistibly drawn to pose another question and thereby a garland of tales unwinds.

This anthology, however, offers modern ballads - not fairy tales. Iconic characters stumble through shifting social mores. Whether set in a student dorm or nomadic tent, most of the stories take seed in hope - the promise of school, a new job, a young love, security in old age - only to end in small and quiet tragedies: educations forfeited, children estranged from parents, an ambulance whisking a young woman away in the night. The contrast between the distant homes of these students and their current lives at boarding school is well captured in Dpa' rtse rgyal's "Under the Shadow," when the narrator observes: "At home, my parents chanted *om mani padme hum*. At school, our mantra was the two-syllable word *gaokao*



'college entrance examination', the central topic of most discussions, conversations, meetings, and even classes."

In some cases, the fall is self-induced - drinking, failure to study, and other poor decisions. Consider, for example, Pad ma dbang chen's "QQ Destiny" and Klu rgyal 'bum's "Who is to Blame?" Elsewhere, the obstacles are situational. Discrimination prevents a would-be-husband from getting a job; village gossip pushes a young woman into an unpromising marriage; the lure of the city and newly found freedom ruin a college student's plans for graduation.

One of the more accomplished writers in the anthology, G.yang mtsho skyid, explains: "I enjoy writing stories because I think they explore social phenomena in ways that other writing cannot." Her story "Set Free from Tragedy" is based on interviews with a woman who decades ago defied village tradition by raising her children single-handedly and even building her own house. In Bkra shis rab brtan's "Young Love," the careful reader will discover, between the lines, even more about local conditions. For example, Mother Sgrol ma wears an artificial lambskin robe, because pastoralists don't keep sheep much anymore and this has driven up the price of wool - details that beg another story. One morning, the offering bowls are full of... *ice* - unexpected until we realize that the precious water-offerings which line the altar have frozen during the unheated night.

Portending signs and supernatural occurrences abound, amid poverty, road construction, forbidden love, elder neglect, suicide, and other inexplicable disappearances. "The sky rapidly vanished, conquered by large clusters of dark, ominous clouds that swept in low to the earth, quickly covering what was left of the sun" (ibid). In stranger-than-fiction accounts, such as 'Jam dbyangs bkra shis's "Powerful Ghost," the extraordinary brings mystery and often tragedy to the otherwise everyday.

Many of the tales are laced with anxiety - parents wait at home for children who are later than usual, tensions simmer between two feuding villages, a demon-monk insists on accompanying a pilgrim, a mysterious person trails two boys - often with open endings. These semi-fictional worlds are marked by an "uneasiness,"



vulnerability and despair, echoing with a profound sense of *lack*, a restlessness. Absence - a white space, a snowy and windswept plain, around which characters struggle and strive - serves to organize stories such as Rdo rje skyab's "Waiting for the Return." Lack manifests in various forms: a father's sudden departure, the unexplained vanishing of a young man, elopement, escape, the disappearance of a just-married couple who fear admitting that she has used tuition payments to raise their newborn, diplomas never earned.

Still, beautiful and decidedly Tibetan metaphors catch our breath. In Rin chen rdo rje's "An Unseen Sign," a nomad sets out from his warm tent as his wife anxiously contemplates the "horsetails of rain showering down." Other imagery reflects the lingering influence of Indic *kāvya*, aesthetic models that dominated Tibetan belles-lettres up through the mid-twentieth century, such as this endearing depiction of dawn: "Sky elephants wore orange trousers as the sun gradually clambered over East Mountain" (Blo bzang tshe ring, "A Stolen Journey"). Or an evening scene: "The crescent moon was shyly gathering strength amid thousands of shining stars" (Bkra shis rab brtan, "Young Love").

This last image aptly serves as a metaphor for a generation of writers who are tapping newly available literary forms: the Tibetan short story was firmly established only by the mid-1980s. These young authors are the first to grow up reading a variety of short fiction in their native language. Of course, the stories in *this* anthology were written in English, several the impressive results of classroom exercises for advanced English learners. A number of the authors graduated from Qinghai Normal University (where the chief editor used to teach English) and now teach English themselves in small towns throughout Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces. In their detailing of daily customs (a mother who pulls out a metal plate and lights barley flour as an offering, etc.), the writers anticipate that their reading audience might be unfamiliar with local customs or that their classmates, from other provinces, villages or grasslands, may have grown up with different rituals.



The stories are short and readable, thanks to extensive and collaborative editing, with some plots more maturely crafted than others. The majority of these works were previously published in various *AHP* issues from 2009-2011, while a handful debut here. Among these is the work of an especially talented writer, 'Jam dbyangs bkra shis, whose ghost stories may roam your mind for some time, like the zombies in his creative tales. In his introduction to "Powerful Ghost," he recalls how when young, he would often spend nights with his family listening to his grandfather's stories. After leaving for boarding school at age thirteen, however, he observed on his return visits that family members now gathered around the television instead. He notes, "One time in October 2017, I asked Grandfather to tell me a story and he told me this story. He said he also had forgotten many stories because he had not told them for a long time." Thankfully, this collection of tales proves that courageous young Tibetan authors are continuing the tradition.

Another successful story is Pad ma rin chen's "Conflict" which details a boy's first experience harvesting caterpillar fungus. His aspiration to collect a bountiful lot and win his mother's approbation, his homesickness, his most delicious meal ever eaten in the warmth of blankets in a tent surrounded by snow after a long day's journey on mule-back... For most western readers, the barren setting is another world and yet the pleasure of simple comfort and other sensations will resonate. These stories reach across temporal and geographic expanses like mountain-cairn testaments to common human endeavors and plights.

While conducting fieldwork in Tibet some twenty years ago, and during subsequent visits, I have mused that the art of storytelling was somehow disproportionately doled out among Tibetans. Whether with village elders, college undergraduates, or women friends, I have regularly enjoyed the communal hilarity of an emphatic narrator recounting a recent interaction or past event.



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Rooted in this tradition, *Contemporary Tibetan Short Stories* is a sacred portal, like that of Tshe dpag's "God-Door," for readers unfamiliar with Tibetan lives, whether in adobe-style homes on arid hillsides or in yak-hair tents dotting the grasslands. At the same time, readers who have traveled to or otherwise engaged these regions first-hand will also appreciate these contemporary tales for the more intimate experience they offer of the thoughtful perspectives and creative expressions of young Tibetans today, as well as the issues, pressures, and opportunities that concern them. In a busy world, this is a book with which one can simply sit and listen - to the rustling grasslands, the approaching winds, and a budding generation of Tibetan writers who face confusing and changing times and are poised on the threshold of their adult lives.

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འགོ་བརྗོད།

Lauran Hartley ཁོ་ལུ་མ་ཡི་ལྷོ་བ་ཆེན།

ཡིག་རྒྱུར་བ། པདྨ་རིག་འཛིན།

མོ་བོས་སྒྲིབ་འཇམ་པོས། ངས་ཁྱོད་ལ་སྒྲིབ་ཆ་དྲུང་མོར་བཤད་ཆོ། ཁྱོད་རང་ང་ལ་སྒྲིབ་ཤིང། ཅེས་བཤད་རྗེས།  
ཕྱིན་ཆད་ལུ་ལ་འང་བཤད་མ་ཁྱོད་པའི་མོའི་གཞོན་དུས་ཀྱི་འཆོ་བའི་སྒྲིབ་ཀྱི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་དེ་རང་གི་ཆ་བོ་སྟེ། དེ་བ་  
འདིའི་ནང་གི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ཚུ་མ་པ་པོ་ལ་འཆད་མགོ་བཅུམས།

བྲམ་སྐྱབས་ཀྱིས། དེང་རབས་ཚུ་མ་རིག་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་དག་ཐོག་གི་རྒྱུན། ཞེས་གསུངས་པ་བཞིན། དེང་  
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གཏམ་རྒྱུད་འདི་དག་ནི་བོད་བྱང་ཤར་ལུ་ནས་ཡོང་བའི་བོད་ཀྱི་ན་གཞོན་འགས་རང་རང་གི་འཆོ་བའི་ཕྱིར་དྲན་  
ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་དོན་སྒྲུབ་ཆོག་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་ལམ་ནས་བརྗོད་ཡོད་པས། ང་ཚོ་སྒྲིག་པ་པོ་རྣམས་ལ་དག་འཕྲོ་ཆགས་སྤང་  
འདྲེས་མའི་ཆོར་བ་ཤུགས་དྲག་པོ་ཞིག་སྟེ་སྐྱེས་སུ་འཇུག་དེས།

གཏམ་རྒྱུད་རེ་རེའི་མགོ་མ་བཅུམས་སྟེན་ལ། ཚུ་མ་པ་པོས་སྐྱེད་སྐྱོང་བའི་ཚུ་ལ་དུ་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་གསར་  
ཚུ་བྱས་པའི་རྒྱུད་ཐུང་སྟེ་རྟོག་པོ་དེ་ཁྱོད་བྱས་ཡོད། གཏམ་རྒྱུད་མང་ཆེ་བ་དངོས་བཞུལ་ལྟ་བུ་ཞིག་ཏུ་སྤྱང་ཡང་  
དངོས་ཡོད་ཀྱི་སྒྲིབ་ཆོག་འཆོ་བ་གཞིར་བཟུང་ཡོད། དེ་བས་སྒྲོམ་གཞི་འདིས་བཅུམས་ཆོས་རེ་འགའ་ལ་ཤུགས་  
ཁྱེན་ཐེབས་ཡོད་དེ། གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་ནང་ན་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་རུ་ཡོད་པར་མ་ཟད། ལན་རེར་དེ་ལས་ཀྱང་ཁྱེན་ཐེབས་  
གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་སྒྲིག་གཞི་ཞིག་ལ་རྒྱབ་བཅོལ་ཡོད། གཞོན་སྟེ་ཚུ་མ་པ་པོ་འདི་དག་གིས་ནན་པ་དང་ཤོགས་པོ་ལས་  
ཁོ་ཚོའི་འཆོ་བའི་གནས་ཚུལ་ལ་རྒྱས་ལོན་ཟབ་མོ་བྱེད་ཚུལ་འདིས་ང་ཚོ་སྒྲིག་པ་པོ་རྣམས་ལ་བོད་ཁམས་སུ་གྲགས་  
ཆེ་བའི་མི་རི་རྩེ་རྒྱུད་དྲན་དུ་འཇུག་ཤིང། མི་རི་རྩེ་རྒྱུད་གི་ནང་དུ་རྩོམ་མཁན་དེས་ངེ་བ་རྒྱན་མ་ཆད་པར་བརྟོན་  
ཏེ་རྩོམ་གི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་དེ་དག་ལུ་ནས་ལུ་རྒྱུན་བསྐྱངས་ཡོད་པ་རེད།

ཡིན་ནའང་། རྒྱུད་ཐུང་ཕྱགས་བསྒྲིགས་འདི་ནི་དེང་རབས་ཀྱི་རྒྱུད་གཏམ་འབའ་ཞིག་ཡིན་པ་ལས་ལྟ་  
རྒྱུད་ཆ་བ་ནས་མ་རེད། གཏམ་རྒྱུད་འདི་དག་གི་ཁྱོད་མཚོན་བྱེད་རང་བཞིན་ལྟན་པའི་མི་སྣ་སྒྲིབ་ཆོག་ཀྱི་ལུགས་







གིས་སྒྲེབ་འཛིན་ལུགས་སྒྲོལ་དང་འགལ་ཏེ་གཉེན་སྲིད་མ་བྱས་པའི་སྒྲོན་ལ་མངལ་ཆགས་ནས་ཕུ་གུ་བཅས་པ་དང་། ཕུ་གུ་དེ་ཡང་མོ་རང་གཅིག་ཕྱིས་གཉོར་སྒྲོང་བྱས་པར་མ་ཟད། མས་ད་དུང་རང་ལ་ཁང་པ་ཞིག་གྱུར་བརྒྱབ་ཡོད། བཟ་གིས་རབ་བརྟན་གྱི། གཞོན་པའི་བརྟེན་ལ། ཞེས་པའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ནང་ཡུལ་དེའི་འཛོལ་འཕྲིད་ཆ་རྒྱུན་ཕྱག་པོ་ཡིན་པ་ལྟགས་ནས་བརྟན་ཡོད། དཔེར་ན། འཕྲོག་པ་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་ཉོར་ལུག་ཡུན་རིང་ལ་འཛོལ་སྒྲོང་མ་བྱས་པས་ཨ་མ་སྒྲོལ་མས་ཆོ་རྒྱུན་མ་གྱིན་པ་དང་བལ་གོང་ཡང་རང་གིས་འཕར་བ་རེད། དེ་བས་གཞན་དོན་འདི་དག་ལས་འཕྲོས་ཏེ་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་སྣ་མང་གྲེང་མགོ་བརྩམས་ཆོག་པ་རེད། གཞན་ཡང་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་འདིའི་ནང་། ཨ་མ་སྒྲོལ་མ་ཆང་དུ་མཆོད་བཤམས་བྱས་པའི་རྒྱ་ཡོངས་ཆབ་རོམ་དུ་གྱུར་སོང་པའི་ཆོན་པ་དེ་བཟླགས་དུས་ད་གཞོན་དགུང་དུས་ལ་འཕྲོག་ལུག་དུ་གྱུར་དར་ཅི་འདྲ་ཆེ་བརྟན་གསུམ།

དཔུལ་ཞིང་སོངས་པ་དང་། གཞུང་ལམ་ལས་ཏེ་ཉིན་སྤྱི་བྱེད་པ། བརྟེན་དུ་འཕྲོག་པ། ཆན་ཆོན་གཉོར་སྒྲོང་དང་བྲལ་བ། ཅི་ཡིན་འདི་ཡིན་མ་ཤེས་པར་མི་གར་སོང་ཆ་མེད་དུ་གྱུར་བ་སོགས་ཀྱིས་མཆོན་པའི་འཛོལ་འཕྲིད་ཁྲོད་ནས་རྒྱུན་ཏུ་གསལ་དང་མཆོན་མ་ཁྱད་པར་ཅན་གྱིས་ཁེངས་ཡོད་པ་ནི། སྒྲོ་བུར་དུ་སྤྲོན་ནས་འཕྱུར་བས་སྤྲོ་ཞིང་བསངས་པའི་ནམ་མཁའ་དང་ཉི་ཤོད་ཡལ་བར་གྱུར་ཅིང་ས་གཞི་ཡོངས་སྤྲོན་ནས་གིས་གཡོགས་པ། ལྟ་བུ། གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ཁ་ཤས་ནི་རབ་རྟོག་གི་སྒྲུང་ཅམ་ལས་ཕར་འགོངས་ཡོད་པ་དཔེར་ན་འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཟླ་གིས་བརྩམས་པའི། འདྲེ་མཁུ་བོ་ཆེ། ཞེས་པའི་སྒྲུང་ལུང་དེར་ཉིན་རྒྱུན་འཛོལ་འཕྲིད་དུ་ཡང་གསང་བ་སྟོན་གྱུར་དང་སྒྲོག་གིས་ཁེངས་ཡོད་པ་བརྟན་ཡོད།

གཏམ་རྒྱུད་མང་པོའི་ཁྲོད་དོན་དག་གི་བྱུང་རིམ་འཆུབ་ཆ་ཆེ་ལ་མཐུག་འབྲས་གསལ་བོར་བོན་མེད། དཔེར་ན་པ་མས་སྤྱིར་བྱིས་དུ་ལོག་འཕྱི་བའི་བུ་ཕྱག་ལ་སྐྱུག་པ་དང་། སྤེལ་གཉིས་དབར་གྱི་འཁོན་འཛིང་། གནས་སྒོར་པ་ལ་གཏོན་གྱིས་བརྒྱན་པའི་བརྟེན་པ་ཞིག་གིས་ལམ་གྲོགས་བྱས་པ། རྟོག་གྱུར་ཆེ་བའི་མི་ཞིག་གིས་བུ་རྒྱུང་གཉིས་ཀྱི་རྒྱུ་འདྲེད་པ་ལྟ་བུ་སོགས་ལ་མཆོན་པའི་དོན་དག་སྣ་མང་ཡོད། རབ་རྟོག་དང་དངོས་ཡོད་འདྲེས་མའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་འདི་དག་ནི་འཆུབ་ཆ་དང་། ཉམས་ཐག་སྒྲོ་སྤྱང་། ཡིད་ཆད་བཅས་ཟང་ཟིང་ལང་ལོང་ཁྲོད་ཀྱི་སྤྱོད་སྤྱང་ཆོན་པོ་ཞིག་གིས་ཁེངས་ཡོད། ཁ་བས་གཡོགས་ཤིང་རྒྱུད་གིས་བདས་པའི་ཐང་ཆེན་ན་ཡུལ་མི་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་འཕག་འཆག་སྟོས་དག་ལ་བ་གཏོང་ལེན་བྱེད་པའི་སྤྱོད་སྤྱང་དེས་དེ་རྒྱུ་བས་ཀྱིས་བརྩམས་པའི། བྱིར་ལོག་པར་སྐྱུག་པ། སོགས་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་མང་པོའི་རྒྱུ་འདྲེས་སུ་བྱས་ཡོད། གཏམ་རྒྱུད་འདི་དག་གི་ནང་དུ་སྤྱོད་སྤྱང་དེ་སྒྲོ་བུར་དུ་ཨ་པ་འདས་སྤོངས་སུ་བྱེད་པ་དང་། ན་གཞོན་ཞིག་གར་སོང་ཆ་མེད་དུ་གྱུར་པ། རྒྱུང་རིང་དུ་ཕྱོས་ནས་གཉེན་སྲིད་ལ་



གཡོལ་བ། བྱོ་བྱོ། གཞེན་བསྐྱེགས་བྱས་མ་ཐག་པའི་བཟའ་ཆེ་ལས་རྒྱུ་མཉམ་པ་དང་གི་སྒྲོབ་ཡོན་བོད་སྤྱད་ནས་  
བཅས་མ་ཐག་པའི་བྱིས་པ་གསོ་སྦྱང་བྱེད་པ་དང་། དེ་བས་མའི་རང་གི་སྒྲོབ་ཐོན་ལག་ལུང་གཏན་ནས་ལག་རྒྱ་མ་  
ཡོན་པའི་གནས་ཚུལ་བཅས་རྒྱུ་པ་དུ་མའི་ལམ་ནས་བསྐྱེད་ཡོད།

གཞན་ཡང་། གཏམ་རྒྱུད་འདི་དག་གི་ནང་དུ་ཡིད་འཕྱོག་ཅིང་ཉམས་དང་ལྡན་པའི་བོད་ཀྱི་ཆོག་རྒྱན་ལྟ་  
མང་སྟེལ་ཡོད། དཔེར་ན། རིན་ཆེན་དོ་རྩེའི། མི་མངོན་པའི་རྟགས་ཤིག་ ཅེས་པའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་དེའི་ནང་དུ། འཕྱོག་  
པ་ཞིག་རང་གི་དོད་ཁོལ་ལྡན་པའི་སྤྱ་གུར་དང་བྲལ་སྤྱལ་རྒྱུ་མཉམ་སྒྲོལ་ཆོབ་དང་བཅས། རྟ་རྟ་ཆར་བ་འཛོ་  
བའི། རྒྱུ་པ་ཡིད་ལ་འཆར་གྱིན་འདུག གཞན་ཡང་ཆོག་རྒྱན་སྒྲོར་སྤངས་མང་པོར་བོད་དུ་དུས་རབས་ཉི་ཤུའི་དུས་  
དཀྱིལ་བར་དུ་རྒྱག་ཆེ་བའི་རྒྱ་གར་གྱི་སྤྲོན་གཞུང་མེ་ལོང་མའི་ཤུགས་སྤྲོན་ཐེབས་ཡོད་དེ། དཔེར་ན། མི་སེམས་ལ་  
སྒྲོ་སྤང་བསྐྱེད་པར་བྱེད་པའི་སྤྱ་རེངས་ཞིབ་འབྲི་བྱས་པ་སྤྱོ་བཟང་ཆེ་རིང་གི་རྟག་ལ་སོང་བ། ཞེས་པར། རྒྱུ་པ་ལའི་  
སྤང་བོས་དམར་མེར་མདངས་ལྡན་ན་གཟའ་གསོལ་དང་བསྐྱེད། ཁྱི་མ་གཞོན་ལྟ་སྤངས་སྤྲོད་ཐོས་ཀྱིས་ཤར་རིའི་  
ཅེ་རུ་འཕགས། ཡང་ན་མཆོན་ལྟོངས་བྱིས་པ། བཟ་ཤིས་རབ་བརྟན་གྱི། གཞོན་ལུང་བཅེ་བར། རྒྱ་བ་གཞོན་ལྟ་  
སྤངས་འཇུག་དང་བཅས་སྤྲོན་ལུང་གསེབ་ནས་སྤར་ཕྱན་དཔུས་སྤྲོ་བྱ། ལྟ་བུ།

ཆོག་རྒྱན་གྱི་མ་འདྲིའི་གཞུགས་དེས་ལོ་རབས་བརྒྱུད་ཅུ་པའི་དཀྱིལ་དུ་ད་གཞི་ད་རྒྱ་ཆུགས་པའི་དེང་  
རབས་བོད་ཀྱི་ཚོམ་རིག་གསར་བ་གསར་ཚོམ་བྱེད་མཁན་གྱི་ཚོམ་པ་པོའི་མི་རབས་དེ་མཆོན་པར་བྱས་ཆོག ན་  
གཞོན་ཚོམ་པ་པོ་འདི་ནམས་ནི་རང་སྤྱད་ཀྱི་ལམ་ནས་བརྒྱུ་མཉམ་པའི་ཚོམ་རིག་སྤྱོ་ཆོགས་ཤིག་བསྐྱེད་ནས་འཆར་  
ལོངས་བྱུང་བ་རེད། ཡིན་ཡང་། སྤྱང་སྤང་སྤྱོགས་བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་དེབ་འདིའི་ནང་གི་ཚོམ་རྒྱུས་ནི་དབྱིན་སྤྱད་དུ་བྱིས་པ་  
ཤ་ལྟག་རེད། ད་རུང་འགའ་རེ་ནི་དབྱིན་ཡིག་གི་རྒྱ་ཆད་བཟང་བའི་སྒྲོབ་མའི་ལས་བྱའི་གས་ཀྱི་འབྲས་བུ་ཅེར་སོན་  
པ་དག་ཡིན་འདུག ཚོམ་པ་པོ་ལལ་ཆེ་བ་ནི་མཆོ་སྤྱན་དགོ་ཐོན་སྒྲོབ་ཆེན་<sup>1</sup> ནས་སྒྲོབ་མཐར་ཕྱིན་རྗེས། ད་ལྟ་མཆོ་  
སྤྱན་དང་ཀན་སུའུ། ཟི་ཁོན་ཞིང་ཆེན་བཅས་ཀྱི་ས་ཁུལ་མང་པོ་དུ་དབྱིན་ཡིག་སྒྲོབ་བྱིད་བྱེད་བཞིན་ཡོད། བོད་ཀྱི་  
སྒྲོབ་རྒྱུན་རིག་གནས་ལ་རྒྱུས་ལོན་མེད་པ་འཕམ་ཡང་ན་བོད་ཁུལ་གྱི་ས་ཆ་གཞན་དག་ནས་ཡོང་བའི་སྤྱོག་པ་པོ་ཆོར་  
གོ་བདེ་བའི་ཆེད་དུ། ཁོ་ཆོས་རང་རང་གི་ས་ཁུལ་གྱི་རྒྱུན་ལྡན་འཆོ་བའི་རྒྱུ་པ་ཞིབ་སྤྱོད་པའི་སྤྱོ་ནས་བརྟེན་པ་  
དཔེར་ན། ཉིན་རེའི་ཞོགས་པར་ཨ་མས་ཆོག་སྤར་ལུང་པ་ལྟ་བུ།

<sup>1</sup> དེ་རུ་ཚོམ་སྤྱོག་པ་གཙོ་བོས་དབྱིན་ཡིག་བྱིད་ཆོད།



ཚུམ་སྒྲིག་གི་ཤོ་རིམ་ཁྱོད་ལྟ་དག་ལེགས་པོ་བྱུང་ཡོད་པས་སྤྱད་སྤྱད་ནམས་ཆིག་སྒྱུར་ཡག་ཅིང་སྒྲོག་བདེ་  
ལ། གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ཁྱོད་གྱི་བྱུང་རིམ་རེ་ལག་ལེགས་བརྗོད་བྱས་པ་ཉ་ཅང་ལེགས། སྤྱད་སྤྱད་པལ་ཆེ་བ་ཨེ་ཤེ་ཡའི་མཐོ་  
སྒང་ཞེས་པའི་དུས་དེབ་འདོན་ཐངས་ 2009-2011 པའི་སྤྱིང་བཀོད་ཟིན་པ་དང་། ཚུམ་མཁན་པལ་མོ་ཆེ་  
ལས་དང་པོ་བ་རྒྱུད་རྒྱུད་དེ། ཁོ་ཆོ་འི་གསུ་སྤྱད་པའི་ཤིན་ཏུ་ཡངས་པའི་ཚོམ་པ་པོ་འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཀ་ཤིས་  
གྱིས་བརྩམས་པའི་གདོན་འདྲེས་མོར་གྱི་སྤྱད་སྤྱད་དེས་ཁོ་རང་ཉིད་གྱིས་གསར་ཚོམ་བྱས་པའི་རོལ་ངས་སྒོར་གྱི་  
གཏམ་རྒྱུད་རིམ་ཞིན་སྤྱིང་ལ་བག་ཆགས་ཟབ་མོ་ཞིག་འཛིན་སྲིད། ཁོ་ལྟེ་ འདྲེ་མཐུ་བོ་ཆེ། ཞེས་པའི་སྤྱད་སྤྱད་དེའི་  
རྒྱུ་རྐྱེད་སྒོར་སྤྱིང་དུས་ཁོ་རང་རྒྱུད་དུས་སྤྱད་མཚན་མོར་ཨ་ཁྱེས་བཤད་པའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ལ་ཉན་པ་  
ཡིན། ཡིན་ནའང་། ཁོ་རང་ལོ་བཅུ་གསུམ་གྱི་སྤྱིང་བཅའ་སྤྱོད་སྤྱོད་བྱར་འགྲིམས་པ་དང་། སྐབས་དེར་ཁོས་མཉམ་  
འཛིན་བྱུང་བ་ནི་ངལ་གསེའི་སྐབས་མྱིར་ཡུལ་ལ་ལོག་ཐངས་རེར་གྱིམ་མི་རྩམས་བརྟན་འཕྲིན་གྱི་མཐའ་ལ་རུབ་  
ནས་སྤོང་རྒྱུར་དགའ་བ་དེ་རེད། ཁོས། ཉིས་སྤོང་བཅུ་བདུན་ལོ་འི་རྒྱ་བཅུ་བའི་ཉིན་ཞིག་ལ། ངས་ཨ་ཁྱེས་ལ་གཏམ་  
རྒྱུད་ཅིག་མོད་ཅེས་ལུ་བ་བྱས་པར། ཨ་ཁྱེས་རང་གིས་ཡུན་རིང་པོར་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་མ་བཤད་པས་པལ་ཆེ་བ་བརྗོད་  
འདུག ཅེས་བརྗོད་ཐོང་། འོན་ཀྱང་དགའ་ལོས་པ་ཞིག་ལ། ཐངས་འདིའི་སྤྱད་སྤྱད་ཕྱོགས་བསྒྲིགས་དེབ་འདིས་བོད་  
གྱི་ན་གཞོན་ཚོམ་པ་པོ་རྩམས་གྱིས་སྒོལ་རྒྱུན་འདི་རྒྱུན་སྤྱོད་བཞིན་པ་ར་སྤོང་བྱེད་ལུ།

གཞན་ད་རུ་སྤྱད་སྤྱད་ལེགས་ཤོས་གཅིག་ནི་པཎྜ་རིན་ཆེན་གྱི་ འགལ་ཟླ། ཞེས་པ་དེ་རེད། སྤྱད་སྤྱད་  
དེའི་ནང་མི་སྣ་གཙོ་བོ་ཐངས་དང་པོར་རི་མགོར་དབྱར་ཅ་ཤོ་པར་མོང་པའི་སྒོར་ཞིབ་འབྲི་བྱས་ཡོད། ཐངས་གཞི་  
གཙོ་བོ་ནི་དབྱར་ཅ་མང་པོ་བཀུས་ནས་ཨ་མའི་བསྐྱོད་བསྐྱུགས་ཐོབ་པར་བྱ་རྒྱུ་འོ་ཆོད་མེས་དང་། རང་གྲིམ་བྱན་  
པའི་གདུང་བ། དེ་ཡང་ལ་བས་གཤེགས་པའི་ཉིན་ཞིག་ལ། དྲེལ་ལ་ཞོན་ནས་ལམ་ཐག་རིང་པོར་བསྐྱོད་མཐར། སྤྱ་  
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## 藏族短篇故事介绍

Lauran Hartley (哥伦比亚大学)

周毛吉 译

祖母温柔地回答道：“如果我告诉你真相，你可能会怕我。”就这样，一个宠爱着孩子的老人开始给我们的小叙述者讲述了她年轻时那个既悲伤，又从未提起过的往事。

从最直接意义上讲，讲故事是《当代藏族短篇故事》的核心，在众多方面都值得我们欣赏和品鉴。正如拉玛杰（2015）所说，讲故事是“藏族文学的口头延续。”来自青藏高原东北部的二十多名青年作家将他们最真实的记忆和传奇经历编制进情节不一的故事里。这些故事令人着迷、困惑、失望、或者痛苦。

每一篇故事里，作者通过开场白来描述他们的灵感，和许多很离奇但又真实的事情。这一框架将“嵌入式”效应引入到作品中：故事中讲述着故事。当这些年轻的成年作家详述各自的长辈或朋友时，我们不经会想起藏族的《说不完的故事》。故事的载体，即一具会讲故事的尸体，被不断提出的问题引导着讲述一个又一个故事。

这本文集体现的是现代民谣，而不是童话故事。标志性的人物在不断变化的社会习俗中步履蹒跚。无论处在学生的宿舍里还是牧人的帐篷中，大部分的故事都寄于一份希望的种子。一场场因教育的失败、父子的疏远、或年轻女子的轻生等导致的悲剧在学校给予的一份承诺、新找到的一份工作、或懵懂的一场爱恋中不动声响地终止了。华泽加的《在阴影下》很好地捕捉到了学生们远方的家和他们的寄宿学校之间的生活对比。正如叙述者的描述：“我的父母在家里吟诵着六字真言；我们在学校里念叨着成为大多数讨论、对话、会议、甚至课堂中心话题的‘高考’二字。”

某些情况下，失败是由沉迷饮酒、学习失败、或其它糟糕的决定等自身原因导致的。然而在班玛杭欠的《QQ 命运》和李加本的《是谁的错》两篇故事中，挫折由处境因素导致：人们的歧视阻碍了一位丈夫找工作；村里的流言蜚语把一个年轻女子推入了一段没有希望的婚姻；城市的诱惑和新发现的自由破坏了一名大学生的毕业计划。

作为这本选集中有造诣的作家之一，杨措吉解释说：“我喜欢写故事，因为我认为故事以其与众不同的方式探索社会现象。”她的故事《从悲剧中解放出来》根据对一位妇女的采访，讲述她几十年前以独自一人抚养孩子，甚至自己搭建房子的方式挑战乡村传统的经历。在孔西拉丹的《年轻的爱》中，细心的读者会发现字里行间体现着更多有关当地的情



况。例如，卓玛妈妈穿了一件人造羊羔皮长袍。通过这件事情作者讲述了关于牧民们不再养羊和羊毛涨价等的社会现象。再或者，一个偶然的早晨，当我们无意间发现贡碗里的圣水变成冰时，才意识到藏区寒冷的夜里没有任何供暖设施。

在脱贫、道路建设、禁恋、自杀等令人费解的表象中，大量的迹象和非凡的事情开始涌现。正如拉玛杰（2015）所述：“天空很快就消失了，被一大片不祥的乌云所征服。这些低低掠过的云迅速地覆盖了太阳的余光。”如将阳扎西的《强大的鬼魂》，这些比小说更离奇又非凡的故事给人们每天的生活带来了一层神秘和悲伤。

许多故事中充满了焦虑：父母在家等着比平时晚归的孩子；两个宿怨的村庄间弥漫着紧张的气氛；一个邪恶的僧人坚持着要陪同一位朝圣者；一个神秘的人尾随着两个小男孩。这些故事没有讲完就被终止，给人更多遐想的空间和余地。这种半虚构的世界以一种不安、脆弱和绝望的特征，与深沉的缺乏感和不安感相呼应。贯穿于故事的这种缺乏感以围绕着故事主人公的一个白色空间或冰雪覆盖的平原形式体现。譬如，多机机的《等待回归》表现出多种的缺乏感：父亲的突然离去；一个年轻人无法解释的消失，及一对新婚夫妇的私奔与逃避。

优美、形象的藏族比喻让我们惊喜。在仁青多杰的《一个看不见的符号》中，一位牧民从他温暖的帐篷里出发，可他的妻子正在焦急地注视着“犹如马尾倾斜而下的大雨”。如此比喻在很大程度上受到了印度审美模式的影响，而这种审美模式对藏族文学的影响直至 20 世纪中叶。洛桑才让的《偷来的旅程》中如此栩栩如生地描述黎明：“身着橙色裤子的天空大象随着太阳逐渐爬上东山。”又或者扎西拉丹在《年轻的爱》中描述傍晚就像“一轮新月在成千上万颗闪亮的星星中羞涩地汇聚着力量”。

这最后一个比喻恰如其分地隐喻了一代作家正在发掘的一个新颖的文学形式：在 20 世纪 80 年代中期才开始的藏族短篇小说。这些年轻的作家是第一批通过自己的母语阅读各种短篇小说的人。当然，这本文集里的故事都是用英语写的，因为这些是一群优秀的英语学习者的课堂练习成果。部分故事的作者毕业于青海师范大学。这里也是这本文集的总编曾经教授过英语的一所高校。如今，这些作者在青海、甘肃和四川等省的小城镇教英语。作者们详细地描述了一些日常习俗：如，母亲在一块金属板上点燃一些青稞炒面祭神等。因为他们预计有些读者可能不熟悉当地习俗，或者成长于不同的文化背景。

这些故事简短而精炼，有些情节甚至比其它故事更成熟。这些作品中有大部分曾在 2009 至 2011 年之间出版的《亚洲高原视角》（AHP）系列中发表过，还有少部分则是在此选集中首次与读者见面。在这些作品中，出自才华横溢的将阳扎西之手的鬼故事可能会在你的脑海



里游荡一段时间，就像他的故事中的僵尸一样。他在介绍《强大的鬼魂》时回忆说，年轻时他经常和家人一起听祖父讲故事。然而，自从 13 岁离家去上寄宿学校后，他每次回乡探亲时都发现家人经常聚集在电视机前。他提到：“2017 年 10 月，我请爷爷给我讲个故事，他给我讲了这个故事。他说他也忘记了很多故事，因为他很久没有讲故事了。”值得庆幸的是，这一系列的故事证明了勇敢的年轻藏族作家正在延续这一传统。

班玛仁青的《冲突》是另一个成功的故事。故事讲述了一个男孩第一次收获冬虫夏草的经历：他渴望得到一大笔钱，并赢得了母亲的赞许；他的思乡之情；当结束了漫长的一天后，进入被白雪包围的帐篷，披着温暖的毛毯吃起的最美味的一顿饭……。对于大多数西方读者来说，荒芜的环境是另一个世界，然而这种简单的舒适又是如此的熟悉。这些故事跨越了时间和地域的限制，犹如堆在山顶的石碑，见证着人类共同的努力与约定。

二十几年前在西藏进行田野调查时和之后的陆续拜访中，我一直认为讲故事的艺术在藏族中是随处可见的。无论是与村里的长者、大学本科生、还是女性朋友，我都经常很享受叙述者讲述他们的近况或往事而触发的那种共性的欢喜。

因为这种传统，对于不熟悉藏区生活的读者来说，《当代藏族短篇故事》是一扇神圣的大门，如同泽和的《神之门》一样。它可以让你领略真实的藏族生活，不管是发生在干旱山坡上的庄廓中，还是发生在草原上的牛毛帐篷里。与此同时，不管是那些曾经前往过，还是首次拜访这些地区的读者，都会欣赏这些当代的故事，因为它们体现了更真实的经历及当今年轻藏族人的思维方式和创造力，还有他们所关注的问题、压力和机遇等内容。在一个繁忙的世界里，这是一本可以简单地坐着就听的书：沙沙作响的草原；即将到来的季风；以及一辈面临着困惑和时代变化、处在成年生活的门槛上的正在成长的藏族作家们。

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GOD-DOOR<sup>1</sup>

Tshe dpag rnam rgyal ཅེ་དཔག་རྣམ་རྒྱལ།



raditional Moon Village lies near the sparkling Galaxy River, isolated from noisy bustling cities. Even the two ancient conifer trees standing by the river seem to have kept their youth, isolated from the damaging influences of the outside world. People respect the trees as a god, a sacred door for the village.

I was sent to the school beyond the river when I was eight and had to pass God-door every day on the narrow path that meandered between the old trees. My daily route provided countless opportunities to have contact with those mysterious trees that both amazed and frightened me with their outstanding height and remarkable density.

The trees stood atop the valley through which Galaxy River flows. The riverbed is deeply concave and the path on the slope of the valley is as steep as a mountain cliff. Despite its steepness, everyone leaving the village had to traverse this path, as it was the only passage out of the village.

"Bkra b+ha, don't ever harm the trees by the river - they are our village's God-door," eighty-year-old Grandfather said the first morning I went to school. "The birds and insects in those trees are guests both there and in our village. Be careful while playing with your catapult."

"But you always say black crows are the most inauspicious birds, and that they bring bad luck to people," I said. "There are many in the trees every morning. They make terrible ghost-like sounds." I didn't know what sounds ghosts made, and I hadn't seen one before, but I had heard Grandfather tell many stories about them.

"Don't argue with elders, Bkra b+ha. If elders say something is wrong, it's wrong," he said with finality.

"Grandfather, they have no nests there. They fly there from

<sup>1</sup> Tshe dpag rnam rgyal. God-Door. 2009. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 1:373-382.



the forest behind our village," I said, thinking that it would be OK to shoot birds not originally from God-door.

"Remember your age, baby. I'm eighty," he said and turned to the family shrine to make his morning prostrations, his eyes brimming with concern and worry.

"OK, Grandfather," I replied, surrendering. Shouldering my patched book-bag, I started off to school, the sole brick building anywhere near us. When I reached the river cliff, I looked at the trees again in a respectful way, recalling what Grandfather had said. The barley-birds sang welcoming songs to passersby, but the black crows made horrible croaks that angered me.

I took my catapult from my bag and looked for a properly sized pebble. Finding one, I loaded it and aimed at a crow, squawking atop the left tree. I pulled back the string with all my strength and let fly. The crow flew away the instant I released the string. I shot twice more at the other crows but they flew away in the same manner as the first, as though they sensed approaching danger. "They are smarter than people!" I thought, rushing down the river cliff as the school bell started ringing. As I was running, I tumbled, rolled down, and almost plunged into the river. Luckily, I wasn't badly injured. I only scraped my knees so I got up and walked across the log bridge over Galaxy River.

"Curse those inauspicious crows!" I muttered, then adding all the terrible words I could think of, before hurrying off to school, dust permeating my clothes.

That evening I told Grandfather what had happened. He frowned, then smiled broadly, and finally said, "Have you ever heard the saying, 'Listen to elders' words'? What happened to you resulted from you ignoring your elders. Let's see if you defy elders after this profound teaching."

"It's all because of those bad black crows," I said, comforting myself.

God-door provided many conveniences to villagers and birds throughout the year. In the winter and early spring, noisy crows and magpies perched in the trees in the early mornings, energetically urging villagers to rise from their slumber and start a new day. In



summer, people were sheltered both from heavy rain and scorching sunshine. Barley-birds and many other birds perched in and sang from the trees, making passersby happier, and filling them with energy.

I liked to join the elders in the late afternoons when they gathered around the Chanting Hall. They talked about everything that was happening and had happened, and how they understood the things around them. Sometimes, they even made insulting jokes with one another, but it always ended happily.

One day they talked about the village's God-door. An old lady called Big Mouth started, "When I was young, people worshipped God-door almost every day by offering *bsang*<sup>1</sup> and the God-door grew very dense. But now, see, people hardly care about the door, and thieves pour into the village." Her mouth quivered unusually when she spoke. Then she began counting on her knuckles the number of thefts that had happened in the village recently.

"Do you still offer incense to God-door?" asked Mr. Picky. People laughed at the question, because the ritual had been abandoned during the Cultural Revolution, and was never renewed.

Big Mouth looked at the ground sheepishly and said, "I would if it hadn't been for that time we all nearly starved," wiping the spittle from her quivering lips.

Seventy-year-old Small Head peeked out from the Chanting Hall, dropped the prayer wheel's pull rope, and joined the discussion, "I think God-door looks as dense as in the old days, but young people's impudent behavior sometimes angers God-door, so it is losing its original color."

Some nodded in agreement while others shook their heads in disagreement. Still others stayed silent without expression.

"Some school kids were hunting the guests of the God-door, too," said Mr. Big Eye, staring in the direction where the school was located, even though it wasn't in view. "I don't know what is good about having such a school that opposes our religion. The kids only know hunting barley-birds and magpies. Maybe those teachers are

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<sup>1</sup> *bsang* = 'smoke offerings' primarily consisting of conifer needles.



teaching them how to kill animals." Mr. Big Eye punctuated his opinion by squashing a fly that was disturbing him.

Some people nodded while others remained silent. "But at least they know how to read the scriptures," said Mr. Modern. "And because the kids are so young, they can't do anything if they aren't in school. I would send all my grandchildren to school if I had enough money to support them. Nowadays, if people don't know how to read, they're blind." He stopped for a moment and registered the reaction of his audience, who were listening while counting their prayers beads. "My son and I have been arguing over this for months, and still haven't reached a conclusion. Today's young people are so stubborn and disobedient."

Many people laughed at this. Others said quietly, "That's what makes him Modern."

"Believe it or not, God-door is sacred and holy not only because it blocks thieves and strangers from outside, but because of its special shape. People won't find that anywhere else except in our Moon Village," one newly arrived, ancient elder started. He placed both of his canes on each side of him after being helped to sit by two other elders. His very old face was covered with deep, heavy wrinkles. His hands shook like prayer flags on windy autumn days. His hair was as white as the spongy ice that lies along the river in early spring. The few teeth still in his mouth were yellowish black. He was highly respected by the villagers.

"Oh, Uncle Do po, you came! How are you these days?" many asked while lifting themselves up off the ground to show respect.

"Sit, don't stand," Uncle Do po said and people sat back, waiting to hear what Uncle Do po had to say. He then passionately began, "You know what? Our village's God-door was the strongest God-door ever. It would take too long to describe the things God-door has helped us with. The conifer tree itself is a sacred component of *bsang*; its smoke purifies all that is contaminated. Our conifer God-door blocks misfortune and expels bad luck. Both trees have specific shapes that match two of the Eight Auspicious Symbols. The left tree looks like a conch, which removes ignorance and helps villagers become more intelligent. The right tree is shaped like an umbrella,



which helps release our village from suffering and removes obstacles from our lives. People shouldn't curse them, harm them, or hunt near them because such evil behavior brings bad luck to our village."

I stood beside Grandfather until the elders finished talking at dusk. I thought of the events that had happened after my crow hunting and felt guilty. Every afternoon I joined the elders' discussion as soon as school was over, and learned a lot about our village and its God-door, but I never saw Uncle Do po again.

Several years passed. I was coming home from school at noon for lunch and saw some strangers by the river near the log bridge. They had left a dusty car at the school. This was the first time I had seen a car and many villagers were astonished to see it, too. Some said it was a ghost. It resembled a giant frog to me, even though I had seen many pictures of cars in the books I read in school.

Three or four people wearing Chinese clothes were near the river. One was carrying a triple-legged telescopic thing around the bridge. They were measuring something. The one wearing the nicest clothes seemed to be the leader. He pointed to God-door and made a chopping gesture. The others nodded. When village kids crossed the narrow log bridge, the men looked curiously, as if hoping to see one of us fall into the river, which of course did not happen since we had been crossing it almost every day for years. We waited to see what they would do after we crossed the bridge. The leader pointed to the bridge and said something, which none of us understood but we heard the other people laugh sarcastically.

"They are scorning us," said an older student. We collected some stones and hurled them at the strangers when we got on top of the river cliff and raced heroically home after all our stones were gone. Some years before we had ambushed the forest police who had always stopped our parents from collecting firewood. We had made them run away, leaving behind most of their belongings. They had never returned.

The strangers at the river became big news in the village. The kids talked about it in school, youngsters chatted about it in the lanes, and elders discussed it in and around the Chanting Hall during their usual gatherings. It was even the main topic in village homes after



meals and before going to bed.

"I heard that several Chinese came to our village from far away in a small ghost-like thing to mine gold in our village's back-mountain, but they were kept away by our God-door," said Big Mouth the next day in the Chanting Hall while turning the huge prayer wheel, smiling proudly.

"Who knows? Maybe they have other intentions," said Mr. Picky. "Remember what happened last year? Some Chinese came and said they were tax collectors, and then drove a bunch of our yaks and flocks of sheep away. Maybe they are the same. Yak butchers! Disgusting!" He spat on the ground and continued, "Anyway we are most fortunate to have such a respectable God-door, which is a savior to both people and animals."

"Uncle Dar rgyas," the son of his younger brother said. He had overheard him as he was on the way to the forest to cut firewood. "You don't need to be afraid. They are not tax collectors or miners. They are interested in our God-door and in our bridge."

Mr. Picky felt a bit better and started to rotate the prayer wheel again, but signs of worry still came over his face intermittently. After a while, he turned to the road his nephew had gone down and shouted, "Mgon lo, be careful! Maybe they have come to enforce forest laws. They might imprison you for no reason!" and then began chanting under his breath.

The shadow climbed up the shady side of the valley from the river on the valley floor. Mr. Big Eye gazed at God-door with a worried frown. At the sight of his eight-year-old grandson coming back from school with several other kids, he gave a sigh of relief and dropped the prayer wheel's pull rope. "My boy is coming," he said and quickly left for home to care for his grandson, Don 'grub.

"Grandpa, our teacher said the nation would build a new bridge for our village," Don 'grub said.

With a mixture of happiness and sadness, Mr. Big Eye asked, "Where?"

"Over the old log bridge. The teachers say it will be a wide concrete bridge," he replied. Mr. Big Eye felt terrible fear and began gazing at the enormous mountain behind the village.



Next year in spring, several "soil destroyers" came to the river. They had paw-like heads and clawed the earth from both sides of the river. This angered the villagers who were very worried about God-door. Villagers argued with the workers and leaders. There were many "stone ambushes" each night. The machines gnawed away at the river cliff until there was only one pace between God-door and the cliff. Some parts of God-door's roots protruded from the cliff; some parts were even damaged by the "soil destroyers."

But for some lucky reason, God-door remained upright atop the cliff.

The barley-birds, magpies, crows, and other guests of God-door were nowhere to be seen while construction was in progress and most never returned.

I missed them in the early mornings when I passed withering God-door. Mother escorted me to school during those days of construction. The road still extended between God-door after the new big bridge was built, but the soundless mornings made me feel hollow.

The villagers had no interest in celebrating the newly built bridge in the way they normally celebrated a newly built house. But some watched the workers and township government officials celebrate. Firecrackers were set off, which attracted the children, though most stayed some distance away. Elders did not attend.

The newly built bridge was very convenient for us kids. We no longer slipped from the muddy path on the cliff and rolled into the river in summer; we didn't slip down the icy path in winters and injure our knees after crashing into the frozen river. The elders' worries, however, continued and grew stronger.

"Those idiots injured our sacred God-door, and now it is becoming more withered each and every day," said Mr. Picky, sitting in his usual place in the Chanting Hall.

"Absolutely! The children refuse to wear their boots and youngsters are lazy about tying their sashes after God-door started withering. God-door no longer protects us from changing into demons. I heard that Bkra shis's son is speaking Tibetan and Chinese mixed together. Who can understand such people!" said Mr. Rdo rje,



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shaking his head and spitting fiercely on the ground.

"Even my own little granddaughter is speaking like that!" said Big Mouth, who was now so old that her eyelids had become as loose as her lips.

"Do you still remember the days when we were young men and women?" Mr. Modern asked, feeling strangely anxious about God-door. "We walked in the rain in woven robes; our feet never left boots and our backs never left robes. But look at the clothes that today's mindless youngsters wear - disgusting!" He spat a wad of spit into the dirt beside him, which kicked up a tiny puff of dust. He continued, "Wearing Tibetan clothes on their upper body and Chinese-style clothes on their lower body - these people are neither god-like nor ghost-like."

The elders never stopped complaining and, with the passing of time, they left this world one by one. Their worries went with them since the new generations were oblivious to such concerns. While contemplating these worries that were brought up by the people in the past, I remembered a sage's saying:

When the jewel is in your hand,  
You don't understand it;  
When others own the jewel,  
You are bothered by endless regret.



CRY OF THE BLACK YAK<sup>1</sup>

Chos bstan rgyal ཇོས་བསྟན་རྒྱལ།

I wrote the following short story in 2010 when I was an undergraduate in the English Training Program at Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Normal University. At that time, I loved reading stories, and had tried several times to write something, but had repeatedly failed. However, writing this short story, based on my own experiences and intimate understanding of livestock, was easier than writing about things I'd never experienced. I finally succeeded in writing a story that satisfied me.

The idea for this story came to me during the summer holiday of 2009 when I was at home and saw my neighbors slaughtering a mother yak. When I saw this, I reflected on how cruel pastoralists are to livestock. Our animals sacrifice their lives for us. All their effort benefits humans but, in the end, even that is not enough for livestock must also sacrifice their flesh to satisfy us. As I watched my neighbors lead their old female yak away, I realized how unfair we treat domestic animals. Through writing this short story, I wanted to show how livestock themselves might think about this situation, and what their perspective on humans might be. Like us, I think that yaks also know true love between mother and child, and between one another.

I use personification in this story to describe the life of a yak as if it were human. The main roles in the story are me - a young male yak - and my mother. When I first came to this world, I saw a beautiful environment and felt my mother's warm tongue. People treated me well and I thought it was a perfect world. I gradually matured and people started to use me as a beast of burden. Although it was a very big responsibility, I tried my best to not disappoint my owners. Later, my owners slaughtered my mother and ate her flesh. Finally, I escaped from the herd with my lover but, pitifully, wolves came and took my lover from me. I was then without a home or friend.

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<sup>1</sup> Chos bstan rgyal ཇོས་བསྟན་རྒྱལ།. 2014. Cry of the Black Yak in *Following the Herds: Rhythms of Tibetan Pastoral Life in Amdo. Asian Highlands Perspectives* 32:21-34.



**M**y arrival happened without sniveling or affliction. My body appeared, entirely encased in flexible afterbirth. The wet ground under me was extremely uncomfortable. I couldn't open my eyes, but I felt my dear mother carefully licking my body with her warm tongue.

The mild weather and the warm tongue made me joyful. My damp body gradually dried. When I could open my eyes, a beautiful sight appeared. The grassland was surrounded by high mountains, with snow-capped peaks soaring into the clouds. Lush forest covered the mountains, like a giant wearing a green coat, and limpid water flowed at the foot of the slopes, like a gentle woman walking slowly. It was a good season to be born. Fragrant flowers grew everywhere, making the environment even more beautiful. This place made a good impression.

There were more than one hundred bulls and cows circling Mother and me. Most of them looked happy, and said, "Congratulations, you have a baby." However, a strong bull stood at the edge of the gathering, looking quite unhappy. I thought there must have been a problem between Mother and that strong bull, but surrounded by all those other yaks, I didn't have the courage to ask. Afterward, a tall, thin female emerged from the gathering and walked slowly towards us with great effort. This old yak licked my head carefully and whispered something in Mother's ear that I didn't hear. Perhaps she told Mother how to protect me because I was Mother's first calf. After a few minutes, she disappeared back into the herd.

I saw many young calves playing near us. Suddenly, happiness filled my heart. I wanted to play and make friends with them, but it was impossible at that moment because I could not stand. I struggled, but standing was too difficult. My desire to stand increased. I stretched my hoof in front of me and tried again. It was difficult. My whole body shook uncontrollably, and I fell back to the ground. Mother silently smiled at me. Encouraged, I decided to try again. I promised with all my heart that I would stand this time and never fall again. Summoning all my strength, I slowly rose, and, at once, I could stand. I was overjoyed and glanced up at Mother's face. She saw that her lovely baby was standing and raised her head with pride.



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As the sun set behind the western mountains, the afterglow moved slowly to the edge of the sky while the high mountains' shadow covered the valley. Suddenly, a short, fat old woman appeared at the gate of the enclosure. She wore a brown robe and a blue scarf covered her head. The long right sleeve of her robe brushed the ground. A younger woman and small boy followed her. The younger woman wore a black robe with no head cover. Her sleeves were tied around her waist and she was walking as quickly as the winter wind. Her cheeks were as red as apples. The boy was wearing modern clothes instead of a Tibetan robe. He walked slowly behind the two women, looking unhappy. He held a long bamboo stick, and it seemed he might be planning to beat a member of my herd. As they moved closer to us, the young woman saw us first.

"Mother, our good female yak has given birth!" she stopped and cried out. The old woman and young boy rushed over and looked at me. Kindness and charity shone on their faces. The younger woman sat by me and said, "What a lovely calf!" and touched my head. This angered Mother, who shook her head, as though she was going to gore the young woman, who was frightened and ran away. None of them came close again until Mother calmed down. Then those people tied each yak to a rope. When they finished, it was already dusk. Fortunately, they didn't come again and make Mother angry. They closed the gate of the livestock yard and went to their warm tent.

Darkness gradually covered the ground. The moon appeared and shone in the dark sky, and small stars appeared, one after another beside the moon. The weather was warm and damp. Most of the yaks lay on the ground, sleeping deeply, but Mother just stood silently by my side. She didn't tell me why, but I knew she was protecting me. I went to sleep quickly.

It was daytime when I awoke. It was the second day that I had spent in this world. I stood up and walked slowly. The sun gradually warmed the earth. The yaks got up and looked into the distance. I thought my herd members must be hungry. Mother sniffed beside me. Maybe she was hungry too.



After a while, the old woman, the young woman, and the young boy emerged from the tent and entered our enclosure. The old woman held an empty wooden bucket. They were coming directly toward us. I didn't know what they wanted to do. The little boy came to me and guided my head to Mother's udder. She licked my body carefully as I nursed her. Without warning, the old woman moved near us, and the boy suddenly pulled me away. The old woman hobbled Mother's feet with a short rope, sat under Mother, and started milking her. Ten minutes later, she happily left with a full bucket of milk and went into the tent.

Meanwhile, the young woman was collecting yak dung in the livestock yard. All the yaks were happy because they would soon be free. They gazed at the young woman as if to encourage her hard work. The boy pushed me to suckle again, but I refused because I was already full. The young woman finished collecting dung and began untying all the yaks, who ran immediately to the boundless grassland. The small boy took a stone and cast it toward the herd with a shout. The yaks were startled and ran faster than before. Mother, an older female, and I walked slowly behind them. Mother wanted to protect me and didn't want to run. One yak could not run because she was the oldest female in our herd. She had three calves, and after her last child was born, she became unhappy and her husband renounced her. He married another cow, so she was unhappy about that. Probably there was not much time left in her life.

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I was soon one month old. Everything was going perfectly. Mother's warm milk helped me grow quickly. My hair and small horns grew longer. My whole body seemed stronger than any other calf my age. In fact, even though I could have beaten anyone my age, I never fought, especially with yaks smaller than me. Mother was proud that I had a good relationship with the other calves. The people who lived in the tent loved me dearly.

One morning they surrounded me and Mother and talked about something for a long time. I didn't understand what they said.

"Mother, what was that about?" I asked.



"They praised you. They said that you are the best calf in our community. They hope you will be very capable when you grow up," Mother answered proudly.

The next day they came again and gave me a beautiful name, Rog ldang, 'black yak with sharp horns'. The name showed that I was strong and energetic. Mother and I were proud of my lovely new name.

Mother explained how difficult and tortuous yaks' lives are. "You are male and have a difficult path ahead of you. You must be stronger than the others. When you are the herd leader, everybody will obey and respect you," she said with a wistful face.

One day when the sun still hadn't risen, people hurried to take down the tent, in preparation for moving. I asked Mother what they were doing. "They are going to move to the top of the mountain because it is too hot down here in summer. Up on the mountain, it is cool and comfortable. We live at the foot of the mountains in winter because it is warmer here," Mother answered slowly.

The people loaded everything into plastic boxes. The men put a wooden pack frame on some male yaks' backs. The frame didn't look very heavy, but they must have been uncomfortable. I asked Mother, "What are they doing?"

"Herders pack everything on a yak's back, even their little children. Yaks always suffer from this work," Mother answered with a little sadness.

We started off. Some bulls walked in front of us, while Mother and I stayed in the middle of the herd. The people followed us. Some of them were on horseback, but most of them went on foot. The boy picked up stones and threw them at us. After a while, we reached a large river. I thought it would be difficult to cross the river, as it seemed very deep. I asked Mother what we should do next. She told me that I needed to be brave, adding that if I could not cross the river, I would never be a real yak. This was the first real danger I had faced. I was scared and trembling, but I didn't say anything. Mother looked back at me after she crossed the river, and then I jumped in and crossed safely.



After crossing the river, we passed through a forest, and then came to our destination, a vast grassland. The fragrance of countless flowers and grasses freshened the environment and filled us with vitality. We were all pleased to eat such nice grass. A small stream hummed an endless melody. The people were busy setting up the tents. Some tired yaks lay on the ground and rested. Everyone seemed truly relaxed.

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On the second day at our new home, I awoke with an ominous feeling. Thick clouds covered the horizon and a little rain fell. Blue smoke from the tent looked like a long, blue bolt of silk unfolding endlessly into the sky. All the yaks were gathered in the enclosure, lying on the ground, feeling sleepy.

About an hour later, the old woman brought a bucket and walked directly toward us with slow steps. After she finished milking, the old woman did something truly remarkable. She separated the adult yaks and drove them away from the calves. However, Mother persevered and stayed with me. Annoyed with my mother's persistence, the woman threw sharp stones at her. I was puzzled and didn't understand why they had tried to separate us. After Mother finally joined the other yaks and moved away, the woman allowed the calves to go near the tent. She wanted us to stay nearby. The boy herded us by the stream, which was near the tent. He was cruel, and beat us without reason, causing us much misery.

We calves were too young to eat grass. Dependent on our mother's milk, we were not accustomed to drinking cold water and eating grass. We got very hungry. But, when our mothers returned in the evening, the people did not let us drink milk immediately. They took milk from our mothers' udders twice a day. We had nothing to drink from early morning until late afternoon. Sometimes we drank a little water and nibbled a little grass. I was angry that people had deprived me of Mother's milk, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it. As animals, our lives are different from humans'. They are our masters and we have to obey them. We are just unfortunate livestock.



One of my relatives often told me, "Yaks' lives are miserable. A good yak must be a real yak, and a real yak needs to do plenty of dangerous things in his life. This is a rule we yaks must follow." This deeply impressed me. My name, Rog ldang, always encouraged me to be brave.

That night, everyone went to sleep except Mother and me.

I asked Mother, "Why don't people let us drink milk?"

"Winter is coming, and they need to store butter, cheese, and dry yogurt, all of which are made from milk. The way you suffer when you can't drink milk is the result of yaks' bad karma," Mother said slowly. I then realized the reason why they were selfish and decided I would eat more grass and drink more water.

...

Several months passed. The weather became increasingly chilly, as harsh winter descended without mercy. Snow fell, turning the world white. We moved to the foot of the mountains, but it was still cold there, and we couldn't find any warm places to stay. Thick snow covered the grass, so we had no way to get food. We all suffered from hunger, and gradually, our bodies became thinner and thinner. Sometimes we found a few bits of dry grass during the daytime, but by night we were hungry again. Mother had become weak from hunger and fell seriously ill. Some older females nearly died. They found it very difficult to move, so they just lay on the ground.

One dark night when snow was falling heavily, we could not find a comfortable place to lie. All the livestock stood with their bodies shaking. I stood beside Mother. My feet were extremely cold from the snow. Everything was silent. I went under Mother, where it was a little warmer.

"My dear! This is our bad fate. Many in our herd will die this winter. The sky has punished us with snow, and the earth has punished us by hiding the grass. We don't know why our karma is so bad. Perhaps we did something wrong in our previous lives. However, you need to continue doing your best," Mother whispered.

"Yes, Mother, I'll try. I won't give up," I promised. That night was so very cold that we couldn't sleep for a while.

The next morning, I opened my eyes and saw all the animals



standing around, looking unhappy.

"Mother, what happened?" I asked.

"The oldest female died. She was the kindest member of our herd. I hope her soul will go to the sky," Mother said sympathetically. We could only stand and shed tears. The tent was calm and silent in the snow. When the old woman came outside, she looked at the oldest female and came toward us. "Bad karma has gone," she murmured under her breath and went back into the tent.

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We had a hard time that winter. Nearly all the oldest members in our herd died. It was their destiny, I suppose, so there was no way we could change it. I encountered many dangers that winter, and so, afterward, I wasn't afraid of anything.

One morning, a bright spring sun hung in the clear sky, filling the vast grassland with vitality. Our lives had improved since the harsh winter. We were satisfied just to be alive.

In my second year, the herders called me *ya ru*. I had grown quickly and was already a big yak. I was the biggest calf in our herd. My horns were unimaginably sharp. They were weapons that I could use when I faced danger. My friends said that I should be proud of my sharp horns. Mother and all my relatives were delighted with my strong body and wonderful horns. They told me that they hoped I would grow up to be a big, strong bull.

One morning during my second year, something unusual happened. An old man and some other people brought a bowl of water, another bowl of water mixed with milk, and a piece of butter. The old man began chanting scriptures. When he finished chanting, he took the bowl of water and poured some of it on my head three times, and then he poured the rest of the water over my body from my head to rump. Then, he took the other bowl and poured it on me from my rump to my head. Next, he took the piece of butter, smeared it on my forehead, and said kindly, "From now on, you are safe. We won't eat your meat after you die and we won't sell you. We hope you will give us many offspring. You now belong to the mountain deity, and you are free until you die." The herders then left quickly.



Mother approached me with a smile more joyful than I had ever seen before. She said, "Every year this family chooses the best young yak and saves it from death. You are the lucky one this year. You are the free male in this group, but still you must serve our masters your whole life, otherwise, they will change your name and slaughter you for food."

Mother's explanation made me happy but also frightened me. Looking directly at me she said, "Your father was also a strong male."

I asked, "Where is my father?"

She told me in a trembling voice, "He passed away before you came."

"How did he die?" I asked.

Coming a little closer to me she began, "It's a long story, but I'll make it short. I was one of the most beautiful females in our group before your birth. At that time, many males were circling me and telling me that they were in love with me, but your father and I loved each other deeply and were often together. He protected me from harm. He died after a big blizzard before you were born." She lowered her head as tears filled her eyes.

"Mother, I'll protect and love you forever," I tried to say, but no sound came out. I then promised in my heart that I would create a comfortable life for my dear mother.

...

From my second year to my sixth year, many things happened, but they aren't worth describing.

One morning in May, when I was seven and Mother was seventeen, five tall, rugged men came and murmured something to each other that I didn't understand. They took a rough rope, put it around my neck, and pulled it tight with all their strength. Two strong men pulled the rope and led me to their tent. A boy beat my back with a stick. I was terrified and didn't want to go with them. However, there was no way I could flee. I then understood that they wanted to teach me how to carry packs with a wooden frame.

First, they tied my front legs together with a short rope, put a pack frame on my back, put a rope under my neck, put the second rope around my chest, put a third rope under my tail, and fastened



the ropes to the pack frame so it was steady on my back. Afterward, two men took two bags of barley and put one bag on either side of the frame.

When they finished, my body was shaking. I was so bewildered that I lay on the ground. The men angrily threw stones at me and beat me with sticks. I tried to stand, but it was impossible. The men said that I was lazy and that they ought to beat me to death.

Rgya mtsho, their old grandfather, suddenly shouted, "That's enough! Stop! Stop beating him!"

The men then untied the ropes and took off the pack frame. I couldn't stand because one of my front legs was almost broken. There was blood everywhere. The people silently looked at each other, regretting that they had beaten me.

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After three months the pain had lessened. Mother was really happy. Since the day I was injured, the people had become extremely kind to me and I enjoyed a comfortable life. Time elapsed quickly. Later, however, my life became terrible again.

One night, after everyone had gone to sleep, a breeze disturbed my wonderful dream. Everything was calm and quiet, except for the snoring of the old bulls. Before I went to sleep again, I saw that my dear mother was awake. It seemed that she was thinking about something.

I approached and asked, "Dear Mother, what are you thinking? You're unhappy about something, aren't you?"

She looked at me and didn't say anything for a while. Then she said, "I'm thinking about you. You're too disobedient."

"Sorry, Mother, for the trouble I've caused. I'll listen to you."

She looked at me sternly and said, "Your mother is anxious about you every minute. You must listen to people and do what they say. If you don't obey them, they may be cruel to you."

I lowered my head and said, "Mother, I will do as you tell me."

Then she said, "Before you were here, there was a strong bull who never obeyed people and fought them with his horns. Finally, they caught him and slaughtered him with their sharp knives. Your father wasn't like that. He always listened to people and sacrificed



himself for them. Our masters hope you will become a tame yak who will work for them your whole life. You must obey them."

I nodded my head and said, "Mother, I will follow your advice."

Mother said sorrowfully, "I am weak these days. Something may happen to me tomorrow."

"Mother! Don't worry, I'll take care of you," I said.

She looked at me, smiled, and said, "I'm really proud to have a son like you."

I knew Mother wanted to sleep, so I said goodbye and left her.

When I opened my eyes, the sun had risen in the sky. Bright light reflected off grassland streams, resembling shards of broken glass. Some smoke appeared above the tent and floated across the blue sky. Everyone was asleep, and I went to see Mother. Suddenly, two strong men came out from the tent and approached us with a long rope. Mother stood up immediately, exclaiming, "I knew they would slaughter me today."

I was confused, "Why?"

Mother's voice quivered as she said, "No reason... this is just what humans do to us. I sacrificed my whole life for this family, but finally, my flesh must be their food. Darling, I need to go, just remember to do what I told you."

The two men tied a rough rope around Mother's neck and led her over to the tent. Mother pulled back a few times but didn't succeed in getting free. A woman came and untied the rest of us from where we were tethered. I tried to run towards Mother, but they threw stones at me, hurting my left leg. I was very sad that they had taken Mother away. I went to the mountain but didn't eat any grass all day.

We came back home at dusk. I saw a fire burning brightly inside the black tent, and heard people laughing and talking excitedly. I knew that the dishes of meat in front of them were my dear mother's flesh. Tears brimmed in my eyes.

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During that long hot summer, I lived alone in the herd. I didn't want to eat or drink. I felt everything was meaningless and empty without



Mother's companionship.

One of the females from our group was my age. Her name was 'Bri mo. She was not very beautiful, but her compassionate heart was revealed in her shining eyes.

One day she said, "I know you feel bad, but don't be too upset. That's how life is. Yesterday is history, and nobody knows the future. You are not responsible for your mother's death. Our lives depend on herders. We don't know who will die next. Perhaps you or me, who knows?"

I nodded my head and said, "Yes, what you say is true."

Afterward, she and I were constantly together. She told me her life experiences and I told her mine.

Then one day, she suggested, "Let's leave and go somewhere."

"Where?" I said.

"Anywhere, so long as there is plenty of grass to eat," she said.

I agreed since it was very hot on the grassland. We spent three days and nights walking, sharing everything as we went. I felt my heart grow closer to her day by day. Finally, we reached our destination. It was a good place, with plenty of grass and water. It was near a big forest with lots of shade where we rested when we felt hot. We were happy there.

On the first day, we were curious and ran around. When we were full from eating grass, we rested in the forest. One night it looked like a big storm was coming, so we sheltered under the trees. It was so dark that we couldn't see any stars.

"I'm in love with you," I said hesitantly.

"I know you are a good bull," she said with a smile.

We talked for a long time, and in the end, we shared our first kiss.

A short time later, we heard the terrifying sound of wolves in the mountains. 'Bri mo shook in fright. I didn't know what to do. I told her to run to the west. We heard the wolves howling behind us. When I looked back, I saw a huge, powerful wolf jump on 'Bri mo. I felt pity, but I lacked the power to save her. Suddenly, a wolf bit my hind leg. It was so painful that I almost stopped running. I turned and gored him. While running, I looked back, and then tumbled



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down a cliff. I don't know what happened next.

The next morning, I found I was injured and my lover had become the wolves' meal. I felt empty. I had nothing left. I wandered. The herders never came looking for me. I was alone and could only hear the sound of my own hooves, the sound of rivers, and the howling of wolves. Day after day, year after year, time crawled by. I had lost everything. Probably my masters and even my herd had forgotten me. I wished that the sky above would take my soul back home.



A BLEEDING WATERMELON<sup>1</sup>

Nor bzang རྣ་བཟང་།

Nor bzang (b. 1988) is a native of Dpa' ris (Tianzhu) Tibetan Autonomous County, Gansu Province). Nor bsang writes:

I heard that a university student opened an elevator door in a campus building still under construction. The elevator shaft was empty and he fell to his death. Many people had questions about his death. This inspired me to write this story.

...

**T**here were three dormitory rooms for me, an Art Department freshman, to choose from on 1 September 2003. I chose the one on the eighth floor. The four-boy room looked new and comfortable. Nobody had moved in yet. I was really pleased with my choice.

I went near the only window of this room, opened it, and looked out. I had a grand view of the university campus. Green trees rustled in a gentle breeze, charming flowers beckoned with nodding heads, and students walked energetically about in colorful clothing. Everything seemed peaceful. I stuck out my head and looked down from the window to concrete pavement. A feeling of acrophobia made me nervous and uncomfortable. I drew back, told myself to relax, and then set to work making up my bed, which I finished in a couple of minutes. I lay down, hoping I would have nice roommates.

Somebody knocked on the door, opened it, and in came a tall, thin, long-haired young man wearing a black leather jacket. He put down an enormous backpack and asked, "Is this a dorm room for students in the Art Department?"

Yes," I replied.

It's a nice dorm room, isn't? What's your name?" he asked, offering a cigarette.

<sup>1</sup> Norsang. A Bleeding Watermelon. 2010. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 6:307-311.



Rdo rje," I answered, waving my left hand, signaling I did not smoke. "Yours?"

"Nor bu," he replied.

The door opened again as Nor bu and I were introducing ourselves. Two boys came in and asked the same question and, once sure they were in the right room, quickly made up their beds.

Rin chen and Mgon po, the second two arrivals, were both from Mgo log. Somehow, Nor bu didn't tell us where he was from.

A month later, we had become friends. Except for the time we spent in the classroom, we spent most of our time in the dorm room, doing homework, playing the guitar, reading, and talking about women.

One night when we were chatting as usual, Mgon po said, "I had a strange dream last night."

"Tell us about it," prompted Rin chen with curiosity.

"Well, it was about a watermelon. It fell from very high up, hit the ground, and then exploded into hundreds of bright red pieces," Mgon po said.

"Is that a strange dream?" I asked.

"You must have been thirsty when you were dreaming. That's why you dreamed about a watermelon," said Rin chen, laughing.

"Would you please let me finish?" said Mgon po in irritation. "The watermelon hit the ground and then splattered. But I saw blood. It was bleeding and something white oozed out."

"A bleeding watermelon? What a ridiculous dream," I said, feeling disgusted.

"That was a sick dream," Rin chen added.

"I shouldn't have told you guys anything about my dream," said Mgon po unpleasantly, which ended our discussion.

...

A wailing ambulance siren woke me. I got up, opened the window, and looked down. An ambulance was right by our dormitory building. I was going to return to bed and then I noticed Mgon po's quilt lay limply on the floor. His bed was empty. I woke up my other two roommates and asked them about Mgon po, but they didn't know anything.



I went to the classroom, still wondering about Mgon po. Before the teacher began class, Nor bu, Rin chen, and I were called into the hallway by a policeman. Mgon po was dead. He had fallen out of the dorm room window and died when his head struck the concrete pavement.

We spent a day with the police who examined everything in our dorm room. The final conclusion was that Mgon po had committed suicide.

A month later, everything had pretty much returned to normal. We avoided talking about Mgon po, especially in our dorm room.

One night when we were doing homework, Rin chen asked, "Do you remember the dream that Mgon po had? I had the same dream last night."

"Please don't talk about him!" I said.

"OK, whatever," said Rin chen, and returned to his homework.

Nor bu said nothing as he continued to smoke and read.

I was awakened the next morning by a blaring siren. I blearily looked at Rin chen's bed. It was empty.

Rin chen was dead. He had died in exactly the same way as Mgon po. I was terrified. I talked to two of my teachers and they both said the same thing: "Don't worry. Don't think too much. It was just a coincidence."

I was dreadfully nervous and wondered if I was to be the next victim.

That night I went back to the dorm room around nine o'clock. It was very dark. I turned on the light. Nor bu was sitting on his bed.

I felt this was odd and asked, "Why didn't you turn on the light?"

"Don't worry, man! Everything's going to be fine," he said, ignoring my question

"Thanks!" I replied and then lay on my bed and tried to sleep.

That night I dreamed of a watermelon falling to the ground. It broke when it hit the ground. Blood was everywhere. Something white oozed out from the splattered main part of the watermelon. I



woke up and was terrified. "I will die," I said to myself. "That's the same dream they had before they leaving this world!"

I rushed out of the room, down the stairs, and ran to the police station near the school gate. I don't want to die. Help! Help!" I shouted to the policemen.

They ignored me, assuming I was insane. I shouted, cried, and finally fainted.

When I woke up I was lying in my dormitory bed. The room was cloaked in a somber atmosphere. My head ached. I looked at my watch. It was 10:01 AM. I assumed my classmates had brought me to my room. I looked around. Nor bu was sitting on his bed, staring at me with eyes that gleamed and seemed strangely green. I tried to shout but I couldn't make a sound. I felt myself moving from the bed. I couldn't control it. I willed my body to stop as it neared the window. My hands opened the window and I jumped out. I was falling to the ground upside down. I could hear the wind blow past my ears. I could see the concrete pavement ever more vividly. I even saw the blood marks that Rin chen's and Mgon po's broken heads had left on the pavement. That oozy white stuff, I suddenly realized, was human brains.

I jerked awake and saw three empty beds in the room. I was panting. Someone knocked on the dormitory door and opened it. A tall, thin, long-haired young man entered. He wore a black jacket and was carrying a huge backpack.

Is this a dorm room for Art Department freshmen?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, staring at him and feeling I had seen him somewhere before.



AN UNSEEN SIGN<sup>1</sup>

Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ།

I wrote this story based on events in Rong ru ma Village, Skya rong (Jiangrong) Township, Rka khog (Hongyuan) County, Rnga ba (Aba) Prefecture, Sichuan Province. These events frightened local villagers and made their hearts uneasy. Though it is hard to know if what happened was mere coincidence or related to mountain deities, it was very unexpected and unusual. I wrote this story to remember the lives that we lost due to unseen forces.

...

**E**normous shadows from dark swirling clouds danced on the emerald grassland of the Rong ru ma Tribe as the wind blew fiercely. Trees rocked back and forth as if they were about to be uprooted. Grass sighed and moaned. The hems and flaps of yak-hair tents bounced in the wind like prayer flags. Women were forced to come out and gather sunning clothes and drying cheese from near the tents. Every living human was suddenly engaged in unexpected tasks. Thunder and raindrops announced an impending violent downpour. The banks along the twisting, serpentine Lab tse River were drenched by the downpour in an instant and further harassed by earthshaking cascades of thunder and blinding bolts of crackling lightning.

"Where's the ax?" asked Nyi ma skyid hurriedly. She was nervous and afraid. Her hair was wet from water falling through the top of the not-so-meticulously woven yak-hair tent. Thunder and lightning continued with ferocious intensity, leaving her heart no choice but to throb far more quickly than normal. Dbang chen, her husband, sat on the left side of the stove, looking uneasy. A defenseless wisp of smoke rose hopelessly and then vanished from the stove between them.

"Here you are, Nyi ma skyid," Dbang chen said. Rather than telling her where the ax was, he unsheathed his knife and passed it to

<sup>1</sup> Rin chen rdo rje. An Unseen Sign. 2011. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 9:29-40.



her, handle first. "The ax may be somewhere outside," he added. His voice normally echoed in the tent, but now the rain swallowed it, reducing it to an uncertain whisper.

In addition to the hoe, pick, and shovel stabbed into the ground at the tent entrance, Nyi ma skyid fiercely and solemnly thrust the knife among the tools, making the door resemble a worksite. The sky was angry, as evidenced by the fierce lightning and thunder. If the sky noticed the tools and such weapons as knives - especially if they were pointed up - lightning was less prone to strike the tent. The lightning and thunder continued as people shouted and prayed to the invisible Yi dam deities. At the tent's left corner, a portable altar was neatly arranged with framed pictures of *bla ma* and certain deity figures who were not daily acquaintances. The altar was where invisible deities and protectors watched over the family, guarding them against evil.

Dbang chen rose impatiently as the rain poured and walked unsteadily to the altar. He fished out a handful of conifer needles from a softened yak-hide pouch. "The lightning is terrifying," he said as he limped to the stove, bent down, and poked about for embers. The fire was almost dead. He found some embers and blew on them encouragingly, reviving them to consume the sacred leaves. As the conifer needles smoldered, releasing sinuous smoke, he murmured, clasped his palms together, and touched them to his forehead. Nyi ma skyid, who had been looking out of the tent, glanced back inside and quickly followed suit. Raindrops had formed a little stream that flowed through the dust, yak dung, and food in the upper part of the tent. The bedding was now soaked. Dbang chen and Nyi ma skyid ignored it. The rain showed no sign of letting up as it continued splattering the tent. The Lab tse River, in the blink of an eye, maddened and began roaring along its downward course.

While Nyi ma skyid was gazing into the horsetails of rain showering down, Dbang chen worriedly said, "It's going to be late, and she'll start worrying about me," and peeked out of the tent every now and again, looking increasingly nervous and worried, even angry. A saddled, bridled horse cringed in the rain, waiting for Dbang chen, like a servant.



"How about postponing the appointment until tomorrow? Mother would understand, I guess," Nyi ma skyid said from where she squatted. The air was now damp and thick and so depressing that it hinted at mourning. For a while, silence lingered. Dbang chen and Nyi ma skyid were like two stone images.

Frowning, hunched, and cross-legged, Dbang chen gazed out through the tent opening. Everything remained firmly under Nature's tempestuous reign. The distant mountains were invisible, and the infinite grassland, by the force of the rain, had become a thick mist. Dbang chen studied the rain through the door, considering what to do next. Deep in thought, he realized how cowardly he felt in the midst of the storm. Disgusted, he mustered his courage and tried to forget the violent thunderclaps, the zigzag lightning, and everything he feared. A true man's decision never wavers, and Dbang chen had decided to leave. Nyi ma skyid put a raincoat over his shoulders like a wife giving a sword and shield to her husband, girding him for battle. Thus, heroically, with a wife's blessing, Dbang chen stepped beyond the protection of the metal tools at the tent entrance, away from safety, and away from his wife. He walked alone into the fury.

Nyi ma skyid gazed at his back, realizing his decision was based on both his obstinate disposition and filial nature. "Old people are like children; they expect their sons and daughters like children expect their fathers and mothers," she thought.

"I have the raincoat. I'll be back tomorrow," Dbang chen said.

...

Dbang chen had once been a stranger to the Rong ru ma Tribe. At first, tribal members only knew that he was from the east. They were neutral in their feelings about those farmers.

Though he limped, Dbang chen impressed everyone with his abilities. He could jump over a taut rope two meters above the ground and his skill at making furniture and building houses earned him yet more fame. Even our *bla ma* praised him for his work. Despite these strong points, he carried the name Limping Dbang chen all his life.

It was when Dbang chen suddenly married a local widow that people really began talking about him. Some said he was a murderer avoiding punishment. Others said he was just like hired yak herders



in Rong ru ma who later married widows or the daughters of wealthy families and moved into their homes. Rong ru ma Tribal elders nodded their heads in approval, for it was clear to all that Nyi ma skyid needed a man.

As the saying goes, sharp weapons are covered with rust; heroes are clad in shabby clothes. Rong ru ma Camp residents never took much notice of Dbang chen until he challenged his young detractors. He spent days and nights enduring sarcasm and unpleasant jokes. During a horserace, Skal ldan approached him and said, "Limping Dbang chen, please reveal the secret of your foot?" and laughed heartily while others jeered in support.

Dbang chen rolled up his sleeves and screamed in a high-pitched way that made him sound like a woman. He brandished his knife and said angrily, "Come, young man, let's see who goes to Hell first," and waited for Skal ldan to respond.

Onlookers were dumbfounded. They had never imagined Dbang chen possessed such courage. Afterward, local people treated him with respect.

...

A worried herder frantically hurried home the next morning with news that ignited nonstop discussion. One by one, men emerged from their tents and went to the Lab tse River banks where Dbang chen and his horse lay stiff, cold, and motionless. Crows made ominous, raucous sounds, flying over the pious people who hated them, especially on such an occasion. The crows perched on nearby branches and then, led by their innate proclivities, vultures appeared, scrutinizing the mourners and the bereaved Nyi ma skyid, under their wings. Before Nyi ma skyid could even cry out in grief, the news had spread like a virulently contagious disease. Tents were pitched and a *bla ma* and his entourage were invited to chant scriptures for the deceased. Nyi ma skyid lamented that she should have stopped him from leaving the tent.

It was fate that Dbang chen and his horse left the world to seek another life together. How tragic. They had not had the chance to bestow even a farewell glance.

...



A year after Dbang chen's death, another victim was taken in exactly the same way, shocking and frightening everyone. Whispers and murmurings replaced the elders' daily chants. Fear and doubt became constant companions. The grass, the mountains, and the rivers were the same as always, but the *lab tse* received more attention for it was the heart of the mountain deities and the deity whom tribal members sacrificed to.

The local leader called a meeting of the elders. After everyone had their say, it was concluded that two deaths in the same season and in the same way signified that the deities were unhappy.

"This might be the beginning of a long period of suffering, misfortune, and evil. In my whole life, never has such a thing happened," said ancient A stag, his oily face radiating sad puzzlement.

A skeletal, bandy-legged old man with a scraggly beard and forlorn face stood and said, "It is impossible to know exactly what the deities want, but maybe we need to make animal offerings." Though the tribe was not in the habit of slaughtering animals for the deities, the circumstances were such that anything merited consideration.

"I am Nyi ma skyid's relative and helped with the funeral for her husband, Dbang chen. It was so frightening. I have assisted at the funerals of many, but I never had such a feeling before. Something crept up my ankles to my spine. This matter is critical for all of us. This kind of death is rare, and I had the feeling that his spirit was taken by the mountain deities," the old man continued.

All the elders listened alertly, exchanging frightened looks, and nodding their heads.

"Let's invite some monks to expel the evil," one said.

"Certainly, only the monastery is capable, and this must end," came a murmur and all agreed, declaring it the best course of action. Some riders left on behalf of the whole camp to invite a *bla ma*, their horses galloping, hooves trampling through tender young blades of spring grass and splashing puddled water.

Children waited for their fathers to emerge out of the pass through which they had earlier vanished. Not knowing what was happening, the youngest tribe members came out of their tents



periodically and gazed far into the distance, their hands above their eyebrows, waiting for candies and presents from the pouches of their fathers' robes.

Tribe members bustled about preparing for the ensuing religious ritual. Many mushroom-like tents were pitched. When the venerable Ham mtha' bla ma appeared with his entourage, his mere presence gave the women a feeling of physical and mental weakness and a great need for strength and renewal. The red-cassocked entourage chanted scriptures for an entire morning, pounding drums with sticks shaped like question marks. The plump *bla ma* with an unusually fair complexion sat on a raised platform and touched the foreheads of those who queued in a long line awaiting this Buddha-given opportunity; the friction of faith between forehead and palm.

For half a day, that land was transformed into a place of great auspiciousness as the *bla ma* and his disciples fulfilled the yearnings of the local people, despite the heat of the scorching sun. Tribal leaders were so appreciative that they convinced everyone to give the *bla ma* one day's supply of butter and cheese. In return, the *bla ma* scribbled a list of scriptures to chant to banish the evil plaguing the tribe. Emotionally fulfilled, the thankful multitude bent their heads, tears coursing down countless cheeks. The grand entourage departed with their gifts of butter and cheese, leaving behind much hope.

...

Flowers sent out dense clouds of perfume on the grassland as swallows and waterfowl splashed in rivers and seasonal pools, leaving ripples. Occasionally, fish leaped from the water to catch fragile insects hovering above the surface. Frogs bathed in these same pools and then sunned themselves in the pools and on rocks. The vast plains were dotted with tents and prayer flags, scattered livestock, and herds of prancing, high-spirited horses, and cavorting colts and calves. It was only in July that the grassland was so beautiful. The grassland's beauty would ebb away as autumn approached, to be replaced by yet another fabulous scene, further proving the truth of impermanence and constant change.

It was a quiet morning. The sun shyly wiggled through a veil of widely scattered clouds. The grassland was briefly beautified,



covered by crystal dewdrops, soon to vanish with the slightest disturbance. Scarves of smoke floated above the gleaming dew. Among the hills and along the calmly flowing Lab tse River, horses and yaks grazed leisurely without a care in the world. Weather-beaten tents lined the river and women milked in yak enclosures.

After milking diligently the whole morning, Lha ri untied the yaks. She was encased in the strong odor of milk and yak dung. The gray fabric apron that covered the front of her robe was stained with mud, dirt, and dried milk. The apron had once been black. Even though her lustrous hair was uncombed, her beauty was unrivaled. This 'flower' of the Rong ru ma Tribe had sparkling eyes, long eyelashes, and enchanting wing-like eyebrows. Her fair, delicate complexion, however, hinted at accumulating wrinkles of age; and her amiable smile was seldom seen since that terrible event had taken Dbang chen's life. Thinking about her past, Lha ri stood in the yak enclosure motionlessly, detached from all around her.

...

"You look pale. Are you all right?" Rdo rje asked with great tenderness and affection while they waited for a bus by the road. It was before dawn and they had crossed the Rong ru ma Tribe's territory. The stars winked out as they waited and an unfamiliar place began forming before their eyes.

"I'm a little worried. I'm married with five children," Lha ri answered bashfully, her head down. Suddenly, she realized she had not thought about her children and family while plotting to elope with her lover.

Rdo rje pulled her into his arms gently and whispered in her ear, "Thoughts of them will vanish like fog when we arrive there, I promise."

As if stuck together, they waited for the bus, tightly holding each other. They remained silent for a long while. Dogs barked in the distance, the barks echoing again in the valleys. They constantly looked at the dusty road that stretched from the mountains.

"I'm not sure if we must do this. It's been some years since we began our relationship and nothing unpleasant has happened," Lha ri said finally, her head in his arms.



The thought of her family now came to her and put her on the horns of a dilemma. Should she return to her family or elope with Rdo rje, the man whose charms, muscular body, and handsome smile had proved irresistible? He was the man she truly loved.

"Dear, you are right, but do think about me! I'm tired of visiting you surreptitiously. Sooner or later, he will find out about us," Rdo rje reasoned, gazing at her pale, lovely face. Rdo rje had met Lha ri five years ago and secret trysts had soon ensued, creating constant fear in Lha ri's heart that her husband would discover the relationship.

"Dear, if we go back now, it will ruin us. What would we gain?" said Rdo rje, trying to convince her. And then, without giving her a chance to reply, a horn blared and the bus rolled into view. Lha ri, halting at every step and staring at Rdo rje with hesitation, finally boarded the bus.

It was too late to turn back when Lha ri realized the thoughtlessness of her deeds; she had left her home, her family, her yaks, her mountains, her five children, and her husband. She had left them all for her lover. The thought of her children made her feel guilty. The love and tenderness Rdo rje showed her gave her just enough confidence to confront reality. Absent-mindedly and indecisively she had followed Rdo rje to a faraway place where they came to lead a simple, peaceful life until...

...

Morning dew sparkled on grass tips before being shaken off by careless animals. A cool breeze wakened Lha ri from her memories. Since returning, she fully comprehended the indestructible love she had for her children. She had betrayed them once and was now determined to make amends. A brighter future seemed ahead of her.

As if an unmoving stone image had miraculously come to life, Lha ri mechanically bent forward and picked up a milk bucket. As she walked unsteadily to the tent, she saw that the sun was still behind thick, fluffy curtains of cloud. A combination of humid air and twisting smoke lingered above the tents along the river and valleys. With the equal chance of it turning into a rainy or sunny day, the sun perched uneasily in the eastern mountains. Tilting her body to



counterbalance the weight of the full milk bucket, Lha ri entered the tent.

At around noon, a blistering-hot sun shone in a vast blue sky devoid of even a single cloud. Some of Lha ri's yaks quenched their thirst in the nearby rivers; others swished their tails in the yak enclosure, and others occasionally raced across the pasture, trying to evade the flies intent on biting them. The family watchdog, shaded by a dead, forked tree on which hung a woven yak-hair blanket, panted desperately, its scarlet tongue lolling. Out of the burning sun, Lha ri and her children relaxed with the tent edges raised. Like a dying man breathing with effort, tiny trailers of brittle smoke rose through the sunrays that shone into the tent. The family gathered on one side of the tent out of the sun. Happiness and laughter defined the atmosphere. The children tickled each other and showed off their cleverness with such riddles as, "What has no eyes but digs a hole?" Time passed happily without heed of the outside world.

At first, the cool breeze that carried the fragrance of summer flowers was soothing and comforting, but things rarely stay as one wants. The breeze became colder and stronger, and the fragrance of newly opened flowers vanished. Disturbing the cozy, nested family, the wind began to shriek and the grass grumbled. The grassland and the mountains were covered by the shadows of clouds forming angry clusters above. Thunder bellowed in the distance and paced toward the tribal settlement. Flashes of lightning joined force with fierce winds and threatened to swallow the camp. Lha ri promptly lowered the tent flaps that had been lifted up and collected sunning clothes and bedding from tent ropes. Rain relentlessly and violently pelted the earth a short while later.

The children cringed in fear in the upper part of the tent as forked lightning and exploding thunder continued. On the corner of a bed, they stuck their fingers in their ears, shut their eyes, and finally pulled quilts over their heads. Although space was crowded, hunkering together made them feel safer. Lha ri stabbed knives and anything that could be used as a weapon into the ground to protect them from the lightning. Fearing the angry weather, she leaned



against a main tent pole. Recalling what had happened to Dbang chen, her mind vacillated between hope and terror.

The rain poured down as if a giant faucet in the sky had been turned on. Lightning streaked across the dark sky as thunder pounded the tent and the earth. Suddenly, a jagged, dazzling, serpentine fork of lightning zigzagged into the tent, and with a thud, Lha ri was thrown to the ground. Ignorant of what was happening, a child asked from under the quilt, "What's that sound, Mother?"

"Listen, it's over now," one boy said, sticking his head out from under the quilts.

"Mother! Mother!" the first one yelled and the others joined as, one by one, they emerged from the bed.

Lha ri never replied.

The elders again whispered and muttered... "A woman who deserted her children and husband deserves it." "Fate is inevitable, we can do nothing." ...

The local people seemed like rocks and stones, peeking and murmuring from a distance about reasons. That was the tribe.

The world seemed fresh and translucent after the rain. Dust and stains on the flowers were washed away and the clouds were nowhere to be seen. Like a boy sneaking a quick look at his parents from a window, the sun shone guiltily above the shoulders of the western mountains. Birds chirped and flapped. The surroundings were as majestically beautiful as Lha ri's charming face had once been.

The bereaved children mourned in the beautiful, dwindling sunrays, as dusk rapidly approached. Tears trickled into small rivers that coursed down each child's face. Forlorn, uncontrollable wails roused the souls of the deceased. Now, as the whole tribe began to be blanketed in boundless, deepening darkness, fear, and worry grew in the children.




FATE<sup>1</sup>

Skal bzang lha mo སྐལ་བཟང་ལྷ་མོ།

Skal bzang lha mo (b. 1986), a Tibetan native of Tsha ri thang (Chalitong) Village, Bde chen (Diqing) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province was motivated to write this story by the death of a girl in a neighboring village who died of leukemia in her final year of university.

...

 path densely floored with autumn leaves meandered behind a lofty red building. It had been her only companion since the dreadful truth had unveiled itself. She stood under a tree with heavy leaves. Shards of blue sky and sun rays peeked through in every possible way to the ground and touched her body. Unconsciously, she stood still, ignoring the beckoning leaves and the blue sky.

Her gray soul wondered, "Have I reached my end?" as a tremor of grieved pain rippled through her body. Finally, she let loose a heartbroken howl, "I love life! I can't lose it! I have burdens! Is this my predetermined fate? I'm not..."

Glistening tears flowed down her pale cheeks and soundlessly fell on the path. The wind gently scattered leaves in all directions. Her bloodshot eyes noticed every movement of the restive leaves - some sailed away in the wind while still others resisted the wind, steady as rocks.

Suddenly, a yellow leaf drifted earthward from the tree. She was annoyed that she didn't know the name of that tree. "Is this leaf tired, hanging on its branch like that?!" she wondered, placing the little leaf on her palm. A bit later she brought it near her colorless lips and kissed it comfortingly.

The little leaf became a tiny mirror, reflecting a dying, pallid face, tiny nose, dry lips, and red eyes. She thought it was her. Parched lips moved weakly and the sounds they made were fathomless.

<sup>1</sup> Gelsang Lhamu. Fate. 2011. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 10:343-346.



Suddenly she managed, "I don't want to die. We could change it... together... we..." She tightly clutched the tiny mirror, but when she opened her hand, the only thing in her palm was the utterly desperate leaf.

...

Encouragement came unceasingly from friends and classmates: "Lha mo, autumn is fading away. Snow is coming. Winter is your favorite season and we're sure you'll be making another snowman, the prettiest one in this world."

"Lha mo, you're strong. We've never heard you say a single discouraging word."

"Lha mo, we'll stand by you forever!"

"She'll never give up, and never leave all the work to her family and only sister!"

"No, I won't give up. I trust my friends and myself. I will make the prettiest snowman again, fulfilling my friend's expectations. Lha mo, you can make it," she thought.

Tightly gripping the withering little leaf in her hand, she sped to her dorm room and stood motionlessly, alone in the empty room. She relaxed with a deep breath that brought warm comfort. She had never thought emptiness could be so pleasant. She cautiously placed the leaf on her bed. The concrete floor had just been mopped and was still wet, which she ignored as she suddenly sat on the floor and madly searched in her old violet schoolbag for a green-ink pen. Finally locating it, she grasped it tightly and gave the withering yellow leaf another, all-green life. But quickly she murmured, "I'm no longer an ignorant child. How ridiculous to deceive myself so foolishly. I'll die very soon - maybe tonight, maybe a few months later. I won't make another snowman. I won't set up a shop in the village for my sister as I promised. It's time to stop dreaming. But blood cancer? They don't know yet. What should I do?"



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...

Full days of farming work ended with the setting sun and strange, odd-colored beams flashing brightly along the mountain edges, forcing Sgrol ma to squint. Every single part of her mind burnt with curiosity. When she opened her eyes, the sun had vanished. She decided to believe it was a hallucination. She tugged her old blue hat tight on her head and squatted on the muddy ground against a huge pile of grass. She struggled, and finally managed to stand up with the heavy stack of grass on her back. She slowly began weaving her way home through rectangular fields, headed to her distant village, murmuring, "My daughter's final year of university," and then she smiled childishly.

Faintly in the distance, she heard someone shouting, "Aunt Sgrol ma! Lha mo telephoned!"

She walked as fast as she could, the pile of grass trembling on her back. Flocks of black crows drew near, cawing wildly. She felt them coming toward her, a dreadful portent.

...

At eight in the evening on that same day, a white ambulance pulled in front of the dormitory yard, its dissonant screams disturbing the usual campus quiet. It soon sped through the streets, but Lha mo had already surrendered to her fate.



A STOLEN JOURNEY<sup>1</sup>

Blo bzang tshe ring བློ་བཟང་ཚེ་རིང་།

Blo bzang tshe ring (b. 1984) is from A mgon (Amuquhu) Village, A mchog (Amuquhu) Town, Bsang chu (Xiahe) County, Kan lho (Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province. He writes, "I wrote this story based on what I was told by the three men who brought the main character of the story to Zi ling (Xining) City in their car."

...

**S**ky elephants wore orange trousers as the sun gradually clambered over East Mountain, beaming brightly into a pure, azure sky, the first rays of light dying the edges of fluffy clouds crimson. Moments later, the sun rose a bit more, revealing a window between the sun and mountain peak creating yet another majestic morning view. The green mountains were as hauntingly beautiful as usual. The extended grassland spread in every direction, like a perfect painting by an acknowledged master. At the foot of the mountain, endlessly winding burbling brooks flowed gently, creating never-ending peaceful melodies.

A mgon Village began waking up. Smoke emerged from chimneys of each home. Breakfast and a new day were in the making!

Thirty-six-year-old Mtsho mo got up briskly and kindled a fire in an adobe stove with straw and yak dung. She did so prudently, in deference to her still-sleeping husband. This was her second time to get up, having already milked at three in the morning. Now she started to fetch water. Livestock, driven by children who had left before dawn, dotted the magnificent grassland.

She quickly returned home with two buckets of water and at once swept here and there, cleaned the furniture, and put prepared food on the short-legged table. The family members soon assembled, sat in order of age around the table, and started breakfast. Mtsho mo poured milk tea into their bowls and then presented one respectfully with two hands to each of her parents-in-law.

<sup>1</sup> Blo bzang tshe ring. A Stolen Journey. 2011. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 10:347-354.



The peaceful breakfast was interrupted by loud telephone rings. Mtsho mo answered and heard, "This is Phun tshogs. Your son, Zla ba, disappeared last night."

Mtsho mo fainted, astonishing her family.

...

A hard wind blew on Zla ba's dark, thin face, bringing him back to consciousness. He first noticed the vast blue sky, his disheveled hair flapped in the wind, like a small black flag. He blinked, felt very cold, realized he was leaning against a boulder, and staggered to his feet. A big valley appeared, encircled by high mountains. This frightened him into utter stillness, not understanding why he was wearing a new pair of shoes and where the several keys in his left trouser pocket had come from.

He walked for several hours following a meandering stream. His intestines were full of water that gave him no energy. Evening came. He needed a place to spend the cold night but found nothing more inviting than a tree, under which he collapsed.

He got up early the next morning and continued, eventually reaching an extensive grassland where he rested and drank from a stream. He had no food.

The sudden, unexpected sound of a distant motorcycle ignited his energy. Running toward the motorcycle, believing it would solve his predicament, he stood straight as an arrow on the path as the motorcycle approached. He waved his arms in the air and shouted, "Please stop!"

The motorcycle slowed as it drew near.

"Where am I? Where am I?" he asked frantically.

The driver unwound a scarf protecting his face from the wind. He was surprised and speechless for a few seconds before blurting, "You are here."

"Oh! Where is here and where can I catch a bus?" he asked humbly.

"This is Bagan in Yul shul. There are no buses here," the man answered, revving the motorcycle's engine.

"Can you take me somewhere?" he asked hopefully.

The driver said nothing in response and sped away.



He felt hopeless. Many hours earlier he had been in Nang chen. He guessed he was now far from there.

...

After the motorcycle left, Zla ba chewed some sour-tasting plants, dipped his head in a stream, and staggered along the dirt road until he fell unconscious in a crumpled heap.

"Hello! Hello! Get out of the road!" a man ordered gruffly.

The strange voice revived him. A sleek black car was purring nearby. Another man stood by him.

He raised his head, smiled, and pleaded, "Can you give me a ride?"

"Who are you? Where are you from?" a heavy man asked in astonishment.

"I am Zla ba from Kan lho," he replied.

"Get into the car!" said the man compassionately.

It was warm in the car and the seats were as comfortable as springy cotton. The car raced as fast as the billowing wind, lulling Zla ba to sleep, but not before he had learned the kind man's name, Tshe ring, from the conversation he had with the driver.

"Why are you taking this man?" the driver asked in Chinese.

"Maybe he is from my hometown," Tshe ring said.

Silence for a long time suggested they were suspicious about Zla ba. "Beep! Beep!" the car tooted at a turn in the road, waking Zla ba.

"Are you awake?" Tshe ring inquired.

"Yes. Where are we now?" Zla ba replied.

"We're near the Yul shul-Mgo log border," murmured the driver.

Two sparkling eyes turned and Tshe ring asked, "Where in Kan lho are you from?"

"Rma chu. My brother is in the Tibetan Middle School of Gtsos. I'm going there. Where are you from?" Zla ba said.

"We are from Bla brang. My son is also in that school," Tshe ring said.

Zla ba was overjoyed, believing this newly established connection would encourage Tshe ring to help him.



...

The sun rose high in the sky and sunrays shone brightly through the car windows. The men in the car felt warm. Beads of sweat budded on their scalps. Zla ba wanted some air in the car and opened a car window. Fresh air rushed in, making them more comfortable. Somewhat revived, Tshe ring asked, "Why did you come to Yul shul?"

"I really wanted to go to Lha sa, but I was delayed," Zla ba said.

"What happened?" Tshe ring said.

"I sold my motorcycle and ran away from home twice last year, but my relatives caught me in Lanzhou both times. I couldn't register in a hotel because I know very little Chinese," Zla ba said.

"Oh? Did you come to Yul shul last year from Lanzhou?" said Tshe ring.

"No. My relatives took me home. All my family members scolded me. Father was less severe, but he said that I couldn't go alone anywhere, because I am uneducated. These criticisms meant I didn't enjoy the New Year Festival. It was very difficult to stay there so I decided to walk to Lha sa with some friends."

Tshe ring handed Zla ba a cigarette and asked him to continue his story.

"We left for Lha sa one harsh morning on the second day of the second lunar month. I didn't ask my family for money. My friends had some. Each of us wore Tibetan robes. We had only three small bags of *rtsam pa* and some butter. The first day we walked through vast grassland and only ate twice. We stayed by a spring at night. We remained energetic about our pilgrimage.

"The second day, we reached somewhere in Mgo log. We met some nomad families, slept in their tent, and ate some good food they gave us. The next day we walked on barren land until late at night..."

The car gradually slowed and then stopped. They got out and stretched their legs for a bit. The driver checked the tires. They were 400 kilometers from Zi ling. Then they got back inside and headed toward Zi ling City.

"Tell us the rest of your story," Tshe ring encouraged, once they were back in the car.



"We continued walking and eventually reached Yul shul. We were exhausted from walking and searched for a place to sleep that night. Several hunters holding rifles approached us. They were talking to each other in their local dialect. Our hearts throbbed because we knew we were no match for them. They walked around us, tossing our few belongings here and there.

"A man with a thick mustache gestured for us to stand up. We didn't. He gestured again, and then his men beat us and snatched our money. We fought back. In the struggle, I was knocked unconscious. When I woke up the next day, nobody was there but me."

"Did you meet us on the road after you were robbed?" asked Tshe ring.

"No. I was hired by a local family to herd their livestock. I did this for two months. I was often hungry. They only gave me a small bowl of *rtsam pa* each day and no cash. One day I noticed some money in my tattered amulet. I tore it open and found 500 RMB secretly put there by my parents."

"What happened then?" asked Tshe ring.

"I left that family immediately and went to Nang cheng County Town by bus. I took a hotel room for four people and found two men already in it. They told me they were pilgrims and seemed very kind.

"We went out for supper and shopped at the hotel owner's store. It was full of clothing, shoes, and food. I saw the clerk holding a bunch of keys to the hotel's rooms. When we left the store, my roommates pointed to a small truck. They said they were driving it to Lha sa and invited me to go with them. That night we talked a lot about our pilgrimage as we drank hot water. A few cups of water later, I was dizzy and couldn't see clearly. The next day I woke up and found myself in a big valley."

"Maybe the two men took you to Bagan," Tshe ring said.

"I'm not sure," said Zla ba.

"Zla ba, have you been to school?" Tshe ring asked.

"No. My family couldn't afford the tuition. If I were educated, I wouldn't suffer like this," Zla ba lamented.



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"Tuition is very expensive and it's very hard for parents to earn cash," Tshe ring sympathized.

"We're almost in Zi ling. Tomorrow we'll be home," the driver interjected in Chinese.

"Tomorrow is the fifteenth day of the fifth lunar month, the day of the horserace at home," Zla ba mused to himself.



## A SPOILED BOY

Sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱལ་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

**G**ser gzhang Village is located on an enormous grassland circumambulated by many different-sized mountains. Tsering and Mtsho mo were Bkra shis's parents - the richest family in the local community. Bkra shis was a very different child compared to others in the local community. He concentrated on eating and drinking. Everybody, except his parents, commented that Bkra shis was treated like a prince.

When he was a baby, his neighbors loved him and enjoyed playing with him but, a few years later, they were full of hate when they caught sight of his face because he beat the neighbors' dogs and scolded whomever he met. Nevertheless, nobody took any action. If they did, his parents were surely angry.

One lovely day, as a golden sun brightly shone in the sky, Sgrol ma put some cheese to dry near her tent and then went to fetch water. Just at that moment, Bkra shis, who was playing nearby, noticed Sgrol ma leave and an evil idea entered his mind. He went to her tent and looked inside. Nobody was home. Guessing they were herding livestock far away, he stood near the drying cheese and delightedly peed everywhere.

Just at that moment, Sgrol ma's husband, Don kho, returned from herding to have lunch. When he saw Bkra shis peeing on the cheese, he could hardly believe his eyes. For a few moments, he stared at him. Bkra shis sensed somebody was near, jumped, and started to flee, but it was too late. Don kho was angry as a wild animal, grabbed Bkra shis, slapped and kicked him, and roared "What a bad child! Who taught you to do such a thing?"

Bkra shis cried loudly and ran home where Mtsho mo was sitting on a colorful carpet, contentedly sipping milk tea. Suddenly, she heard a loud sound and realized it was her son, which made her feel like her heart was being stabbed. When Bkra shis saw his mother, he wailed, threw himself on the ground, and screamed and kicked in a terrible tantrum.



Mtsho mo noticed her son's cheeks were swollen and red and anxiously asked what had happened.

Bkra shis wailed, "Don kho beat me!"

"Why did that fool strike my son? How cruel!" Mtsho mo thought and angrily ran to Don kho's home. "Don kho! You dog! Come out if you're brave enough!" she shrieked.

Don kho and Sgrol ma somewhat fearfully emerged from their tent.

"Why did you beat my son? What are you? Who doesn't know about you? Your family is so poor you are almost beggars!" Mtsho mo bellowed.

Don kho's face became red and his heart thumped quickly. Though he was enraged, he calmly told Mtsho mo everything that had happened.

Mtsho mo said, "If my son really did that, why didn't you tell me? My family could easily pay you twice the value of your cheese. Bkra shis is just a child and doesn't understand what he did. Aren't you ashamed of beating a child! Beggar! You aren't entitled to beat my son."

"I never fight with women, and I don't talk to women who are just like animals," Don kho said and went back inside the tent.

Meanwhile, Sgrol ma held Mtsho mo's hands and apologized. Mtsho mo went back home and told her son everything. Bkra shis did not accept that he had made a mistake and, furthermore, was even proud to have created such a stir.

...

The children stopped herding and got ready to return to classes at a school built in Gser gzhong Village. When Bkra shis asked his parents about school, his mother said, "It's not as comfortable as our home. The food and dormitory rooms are bad, and some students say that teachers beat children. I don't want my only son to suffer there."

"Father, why do parents send their children to school if it's so bad?" Bkra shis asked.

"Because they want their children to become government employees and make money in the future but, who knows if they can ever get such a job? There has never been a man who became a



government employee from ancient times to today in our family, so it is out of the question for you," explained his father, Tshe ring.

The next morning, Bkra shis saw many children joyfully going to school, which made him eager to attend. He pestered his parents until they finally agreed. Bkra shis, with plenty of money in his pockets, was then enrolled in the school. He was very interested in school and many schoolmates wanted to be his friends because he bought snacks for them.

On Friday, the teacher gave them homework to do over the weekend. Bkra shis returned home excitedly, and his mother prepared much delicious food. Their family had a joyful meal together. Afterward, Bkra shis took out his books and started his homework. Mtsho ma stared at Bkra shis and said, "Son, come help your father. Preparing for class is something you do at school, not at home."

Bkra shis went to help his father and did not do his homework.

The next Monday morning, Teacher Rdo rje stood on the platform and said, "Has everyone finished their homework? Who didn't finish, stand up!"

Some students bent their head and stood, including Bkra shis. Teacher Rdo rje then beat their palms with a bamboo stick one by one. Bkra shis's little hands were swollen and red. He hated his teacher and silently scolded him. Understanding that his parents would never blame him regardless of what he did, Bkra shis escaped from school and ran home.

When Bkra shis told his parents how the teacher had beaten him, Tshe ring was angry, went to the school, found Bkra shis's teacher, and shouted, "You are my son's teacher, not torturer! Why did you beat my son? If you are a brave man, let's fight. I'll never let my son attend school again!"

After Tshe ring put on this show in front of all the teachers, Bkra shis stayed at home without duties and objectives, aimlessly looking for pleasure.

The years passed and Bkra shis was now twenty-four. By this time some of his classmates had graduated from university and were



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working in the county town as government employees. Bkra shis continued the aimless life of a young, illiterate, spoiled, only son of rich parents.

One day while Tshe ring was going to the county town by motorcycle when another motorcycle suddenly appeared in front of him. The two motorcycles collided. Tshe ring survived, but the other man did not.

After an investigation, the traffic inspector concluded that Tshe ring was to blame. He was subsequently imprisoned and most of his family's property was given to the dead man's family. Bkra shis's mother became very ill and was almost mad. Bkra shis then became the head of the family. Well, what do you think happened after Bkra shis became the family head?

Local elders advise, "Don't spoil your children, or they'll become just like Bkra shis."



## LAND CONFLICT

Sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱལ་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

**G**yang ldan Village was located on an enormous piece of grassland, surrounded by towering, forested mountains. In summer, younger family members moved behind the mountains in the west and lived in tents, while children and old people stayed in the winter camp to guard their meager property. One morning my family prepared to move and loaded the yaks. Father told me, "Stay with your grandmother and help her. Also, next week, climb Se chen Mountain with Uncle Don grub. It's our turn to guard our land. Those greedy Mtsho nag people have returned from the mountains and are now on their summer pasture. I'm sure they'll try to herd on our land. Keep a careful lookout. Several days later, I'll return and check on you and your grandmother."

I nodded and said goodbye, after seeing my family off for several kilometers.

...

Every day I got up late but, this particular day, Grandmother woke me up early and said, "Sangs kho! Get up! I've prepared some good food. You must go up Se chen Mountain."

As we were having breakfast, Uncle Don grub arrived on his motorcycle. We soon left and started up the mountain where we met some fellow villagers waiting for us. Everything was fine when we reached the summit. Our neighbors' livestock were scattered here and there, but not trespassing on our land. Then we lay on the grassland. Uncle Don grub handed cigarettes to his friends and I listened to them chat for a long time.

At noon, I gave them the bread Grandmother had made. Uncle Don grub took out his binoculars and looked far into the distance and saw that some livestock had drifted over into our land. Where was the herder?

"They will pretend there is no herder. Let's go drive those sheep back to our place," Bstan 'dzin said angrily and ran to the sheep grazing on our land. When we got near the flock, Bstan 'dzin shouted



and threw rocks at the sheep, which must have injured some because they bleated loudly and didn't know where to run. We drove the sheep to Bstan 'dzin's home, put them in a small enclosure, and waited for their shepherd.

After an hour, we saw three men walking toward us. A strong, tall man walked in front. His long hair hung down his back and a dagger was tied in his sash. He calmly said, "Please forgive us. We did not intend for our sheep to graze on your land. They wandered there when we went home for lunch. This was unexpected. We will never let this happen again."

Bstan 'dzin said, "Don't make up such pleasant stories! Your community has bad habits. Do you dogs remember what you did last summer? You slaughtered five of our sheep. Why didn't you forgive us that time? There is nothing more to say. If you want your sheep, pay one hundred *yuan* per sheep. If you don't agree, then leave now."

The tall man's dark face became red. He angrily stepped forward and said, "You guys wait for me. We'll meet in battle," and then they left.

Uncle Don grub said, "Bstan 'dzin and I will guard the sheep tonight. The rest of you go warn the others. Tomorrow morning all the men must gather. Go!"

Uncle Don grub and I returned to Grandmother and told her everything. She worriedly said, "Oh, Buddha bless us! Perhaps there will be another battle. Our men never think about the consequences."

The next morning, I woke up with Grandmother. As we were lighting a fire in the stove, Father came with some relatives on motorcycles. "Son, are you here because of community issues? How are our livestock on the mountain?"

Grandmother said gravely, "The livestock are good. The grass grows better than last year. Our village chief ordered all the men to gather at Bstan 'dzin's home at sunrise."

Father took his rifle from a chest, put bullets in a bullet belt, and got ready to leave. Grandmother rushed out of the house and said, "Son, don't forget your amulet."

I told Father that I wanted to go with him and promised I would stay in Bstan 'dzin's home. Then we set off to where the men



were gathered, sitting in a circle on the grassland near Bstan 'dzin's home. A big tent was pitched in the yard. Chieftain O lo sat at the head of the line and began, "Maybe all of you know what is going on without me explaining. This is not the first time these things have happened. I sent some men to the mountain to watch our enemy. They returned and reported our enemies are circumambulating a *lab tse* and shooting into the sky. There is no retreat. You will make five teams, except for some elders who will cook. Each team will go to one of the five peaks across from the enemy."

The men in the teams left. I stayed with the elders to help cook. I walked over to a tent full of meat and asked them where to take the meat, which was from the slaughtered enemy's sheep.

At noon, the chieftain and some men returned with smiles. When the elders asked about the battle, the chieftain said, "We took all the high mountain positions, but nobody's shot yet. Both sides are waiting for the first shot. This time, perhaps we'll win."

We finished lunch. The elders discussed the coming battle just as some men and the chieftain were preparing to climb the mountain. Suddenly "Bang! Bang! Bang!" resounded as guns fired wildly from the mountaintops. We all looked at each other in puzzlement. The chieftain hurried away with several followers as the shooting continued.

At sunset, we saw some men descending the mountain. Soon a stranger came, carrying Sha bo on his back. One of his legs was covered with blood. Our chieftain ordered us to take him to a hospital immediately.

"Bullets fell like rain. We shot many of our enemies. Perhaps some will die. The battle lasted a long time. Families without guns and bullets must sell livestock and buy guns," our chieftain said.

My village and the enemies fought for five days. Men died and some were wounded. Their parents and relatives lamented and grieved for them. Everybody was full of fear. The chieftain and elders anxiously discussed how to defeat our enemies and finally decided on a midnight attack. Just after this discussion, a car came to our village hall and our great *bla ma* got out with some monks. Everybody took off their hats and bowed in respect. The *bla ma* told our chieftain that



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all our men must assemble at our local *ma Ni* hall. Everyone knew that the *bla ma* was angry because of the battle. Some minutes later all the men gathered. The *bla ma* then went to our enemy's village and brought the enemy leader and some of their elders to our village hall. He explained why fighting and killing never brings peace and happiness, and how we must unite and help each other. He said we were like relatives in the same family. Finally, the *bla ma* told the two chieftains to swear that in the future they would be friends and never fight again. Everybody listened and returned home with their weapons. Father and I went home by motorcycle as a moon rose peacefully in a clear sky.



IS IT KARMA?<sup>1</sup>

Pad ma rgya mtsho བད་མ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

Pad ma rgya mtsho (b. 1988) is from 'Ong bzang (Wuzong) Village, Mda' mdo (Nanduo) Township, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. He writes, "This story is based on what I heard from neighboring villagers."

...

**S**grol ma was awakened by a threatening nightmare and couldn't return to sleep, though the outside was still blanketed in inky darkness. She finally sighed, got up, and pulled on tattered, smelly clothes. Her decrepitude only allowed her to toddle to the door, instinctively knowing she had to prepare breakfast. She made her way to the disordered kitchen where mice announced their presence through periodic squeaks and rustlings.

She started a fire. Flames reflected on her bleak face revealing rivers of wrinkles on a reddened forehead. She sat in tranquility, chanted scriptures, and spun her prayer wheel, recalling the past, tears streaming from her eyes.

...

After her husband's death, she lived with her only son, Zla ba, a short, heavy-set man. Long black hair hung down to his wide shoulders. He sometimes wrapped it around his head with a red strip of cloth. Large, lustrous eyes shone under his thick eyebrows. His sharp nose appeared like a hill if he were viewed from some distance away.

Zla ba ta typically wore a Tibetan knife, which he felt made him a more confident and brave man. However, when he chatted with others, the lasting impression was of a friendly temperament.

...

When Sgrol ma returned from laboring in their fields, she was so exhausted that if she had been struck with even a pebble, she would have collapsed. She glanced around and saw nothing but the messy room, which created more discomfort. Suddenly her son appeared,

<sup>1</sup> Pad ma rgya mtsho. *Is It Karma?* 2011. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 10:355-365.



giving her confidence, encouragement, and hope that life might be better.

As a child, mischievous Zla ba loved to draw. When visiting monasteries, he gazed at *thang ka* and frescos while others prostrated and circumambulated. Time seemed to stand still as he was utterly mesmerized by the colorful images on the walls.

Zla ba noticed his exhausted mother's return, put down his favorite drawing, rushed out of the room, and helped her scatter the grass to dry that she had carried home to later use as fuel.

"Mother, a bowl of tea or a bowl of yogurt?" asked Zla ba.

Sgrol ma shuffled to a seat by the adobe stove, removed her muddy old shoes, and hesitantly replied, "Bring me a bowl of tea. I'm dying of thirst."

After serving a bowl of tea, he said, "I'll fetch water. Mother, you rest."

Although Zla ba had never been to school, he could read some Tibetan and loved to write Tibetan on his completed drawings. When Sgrol ma thought about their poverty, and her inability to send him to school, her bright eyes filled with tears. Neighbors admired Sgrol ma for having such an intelligent, understanding son.

...

Very early one winter morning some years later, a weak sun began slowly glimmering in the distance. Sgrol ma had waited for her son to return from the county town throughout the frigid night. Cold and fatigue combined, clouding her vision. She murmured and decided to return to bed. At that moment, the sound of someone knocking on the small wooden door was audible. She cautiously opened the door in fear it would fall off its old hinges if pushed forcefully. She was dumbfounded when she saw a strange woman with her son. She reluctantly invited them inside and sat, saying nothing.

The room was as quiet and silent as it was devoid of anything of value. Zla ba dared not look at his mother, but eventually managed, "A ma, this is Bde skyid."

Sgrol ma only coughed in response. She was extremely disappointed that he had found such a woman. Her curled blonde hair, reddened lips, and the click-clack of her high-heel shoes were



unfathomable. She summoned all her strength to control the situation but failed. Bde skyid's sensuality had obviously attracted Zla ba's attention and desire.

Zla ba strode to his mother, stood silently for a few seconds, then quavered, "A ma, I want to marry her and bring her here to live. We promise we will help this family and Bde skyid will help you with the chores."

Bde skyid silently nodded.

Sgrol ma contemplated for a moment, took Zla ba aside, and said, "Zla ba, she lives in the county town in better conditions than we have. There's a big gap between you two. You live in two totally different worlds. You have little in common. I am trying to help you avoid difficulties. This is against our traditions. We have no property of value."

He determinedly said, "I know, but she wants to live with me. She understands our circumstances."

Realizing such firm resolve could not be altered and that she must accept this reality, she grudgingly asked, "When do you want to celebrate the wedding?"

Without hesitation, he replied, "As soon as possible."

Zla ba consulted a diviner for an auspicious date and then he and his mother prepared. The wedding was attended by relatives and friends who offered congratulations.

Sgrol ma's life was miserable after Bde skyid moved in. Bde skyid did not obey her and Zla ba always took Bde skyid's side.

One day the couple left, not intending to return until evening, leaving Sgrol ma alone. She did the chores industriously, as usual, sweeping each room and inspecting it to see if any dirty spots remained. When the sun started to set, she sensibly prepared dinner. Although everything had been prepared impeccably, Bde skyid began berating Sgrol ma the moment they stepped through the door for being irresponsible.

Sgrol ma wanted to talk with Zla ba alone, but she was afraid of being ignored. She gave up and continued working.

After more bitter years, Sgrol ma had a grandson and a granddaughter whom she loved with all her heart and took very good



care of. Nevertheless, Bde skyid continued scolding and insulting her mother-in-law.

"Leave my children alone, or you'll profane them!" said Bde skyid, one day as Sgrol ma was teaching them how to tie their shoelaces. "Old woman! Get far away from my children!" Bde skyid continued, her eyes shifting, not looking at Sgrol ma.

Sgrol ma continued helping the children and pitied them for having such terrible parents. She worried about the children's future.

"A ma, leave our bedroom. Look at your muddy shoes. They'll ruin the carpet!" said Zla ba a few days later.

Sgrol ma couldn't believe her ears and consoled herself that it hadn't really been said.

Zla ba said it again.

Sgrol ma was so shocked that she stood stiff as a statue. Life suddenly seemed hardly worth living.

Zla ba was unaware and, in general, uncaring about how much he had hurt his mother.

A few minutes later as thunder boomed and lightning flickered in long sharp shards in the streaming dark sky, Sgrol ma's mind brimmed with sorrow. Suicide? Resistance? Her grandchildren appeared in her chaotic mind and she soliloquized, "Is it really karma? Is it true that you receive what you give?"

...

Years passed. When her grandchildren assumed some of the family responsibility, Zla ba stole a motorcycle with his friends. The police investigated, arrested Zla ba and his friends, and incarcerated Zla ba.

Bde skyid became more assertive and crueler.

Although Sgrol ma suffered more than before, she lived for her son's return.

"Please invite some monks and chant scriptures for Zla ba," suggested Sgrol ma.

"Over my corpse!" Bde skyid barked malignantly. "We don't have even enough money for ourselves. I must pay expenses for my children. Aren't you aware of this? How can we do the impossible? Money must come from somewhere."



"He's your husband and these children's father," said Sgrol ma, pointing to the children.

"Bitch! You find the money and do it. He's also your dear son," said Bde skyid.

When the children witnessed this, they looked hatefully at their mother and then rushed out of the room, screaming.

Bde skyid ordered them to return, but they ignored her. Bde skyid fiercely looked at her mother-in-law and bawled, Devil! You created this! You'll pay for it!"

Sgrol ma's streaming tears rivaled the flow of the stream silently running near the village. She trudged out of the room to the local monastery to pray. While circumambulating the monastery, she heard monks chanting, creating a sense of peace and harmony. She then visited a great *bla ma* who could foretell the future. He had been of great help to her in past years, when she couldn't, for example, collect all her sheep at sunset and darkness fell. It was dangerous to leave livestock in remote mountains where they were easy prey for wolves and vicious, stray dogs. The *bla ma* always told her the exact location of the missing sheep. This time she asked about her incarcerated son.

The *bla ma* counted his prayer beads for some time, nodded in a satisfied manner, and pronounced, "Mother Sgrol ma, your son is healthy. He'll be released in a couple of months."

Joy carried her away when she heard this. She gratefully thanked the *bla ma* and happily walked home. This joy was, however, short-lived once she stepped inside her home and again encountered her daughter-in-law's coarse speech.

She looked forward to seeing her son over the next weeks. Days seem like years when you desperately want something. She continued to endure her daughter-in-law's never-ending litany of abuse, remaining stoically silent.

Her neighbors and relatives understood the injustice of her life. Several families encouraged her to live with them. One late afternoon, one of her brothers came to her home and said, "Sister, why don't you leave? Come to my home."



Pouring tea for her brother, Sgrol ma replied, "I've spent most of my life here. Our ancestors spent their lives here. I won't leave. My deathbed should be here. I'll wait for my son."

"Are you willing to continue to endure such evil maltreatment from that bitch?" her brother said impatiently.

"What else can I do? Maybe it is my karma that I must undergo it," Sgrol ma replied thoughtfully.

"Sister, this family, and even your son, aren't worth such misery," her brother said.

"Whatever my son has done, he is still my son," said Sgrol ma as her brother headed for the door.

Sgrol ma continued turning her prayer wheel, counting prayer beads in her left hand, and murmuring the Six Sacred Syllables.

Some days later the sky was as blue as a bottomless glacial lake. Flocks of clouds bounded madly in every direction. The grassland was ornamented by richly-scented flowers and the musical chirpings of songbirds. Bees competed to see who could collect the most pollen. Butterflies proudly and confidently waved their wings, displaying their beauty on this exquisite day.

Sgrol ma took her grandchildren to the incomparable grassland, told stories, and talked about her past. The children gave her all their attention. While playing, a neighbor came and announced, "Your son has returned."

Stunned for a moment, Sgrol ma collected herself and rushed through the grass. The flowers' perfume heightened her sense of delight. She seemed to dash three steps at a time and quickly caught sight of her son, who was energetically talking with neighbors. When Zla ba turned his head and saw his mother, his eyes filled with tears. He embraced her tightly, as though someone was about to take her away.

"How are you A ma? How have you been?" Zla ba asked. He seemed to be the old, unmarried Zla ba. When he held her hands that resembled dried, gnarled roots, he realized the magnitude of her suffering.

Sgrol ma brushed her tears away and replied, "I'm well." Something blocked her throat and she was unable to continue.



"A ma, I wasn't always a good son. I'm responsible for these tragic events. I want to be a better, filial son," said Zla ba.

"Did they beat you? Did you have good food? Did you suffer?" Sgrol ma asked.

"A ma, all was not bad. I also had plenty of time to think," replied Zla ba.

Sgrol ma looked questioningly at Zla ba and felt that he had changed.

When they moved inside and the children saw their father, they jumped into his hug. Zla ba told them he had imagined they'd be weak, but he was delighted when he saw how healthy and strong they were. The children told him how their grandmother had cared for them, in contrast to their mother, who cared little about them. At times, they confided, she had beaten them with a stick.

Zla ba felt even more sorrow for his enduring mother.

Friends and relatives visited over the next several days, and he learned more about how his wife had mistreated his mother.

"Zla ba, do you know how much your mother suffered these years?" asked an intimate friend.

Zla ba could only whisper, "I understand everything."

He intensely regretted the past and now detested Bde skyid. When he recollected how cruelly she had treated his mother, he didn't want to speak to her.

Sgrol ma prepared noodles for dinner one sweltering summer day. She had planned to cook rice but the children had clamored for noodles. When the family was about to eat, Bde skyid demanded, "Who gave permission to cook noodles on such a hot day?"

Sgrol ma apologized, and said, "I'll make something else for you."

"You always waste food. You never think about the effort it has taken to earn it," bristled Bde skyid.

A loud smack echoed in the room.

"You don't have to eat. And you certainly don't have the authority to scold my mother!" Zla ba exclaimed angrily.

"You... slapped me," gasped Bde skyid, tears running down her cheeks.



"This is a warning. If you offend my mother again, I'll expel you from this home instantly," said Zla ba.

Bde skyid quietly sobbed, got up, and went to her room.

Zla ba took his mother to her room and arranged her bedding. She said nothing. When he was about to close the door, she told him to apologize.

He politely agreed. Then he ordered the children to bed. He went to Bde skyid's room and slept without turning on the light.

The next morning, Bde skyid stayed in her room and didn't join the family for breakfast. When Sgrol ma wanted to call her, Zla ba stopped her. She didn't come out of the room the entire day, which enraged Zla ba.

That night Zla ba asked, "What do you want?"

"Nothing," replied Bde skyid.

"Why didn't you come and eat with us?" Zla ba said.

"I wasn't hungry and I had a headache," she said.

"Are you still upset?" Zla ba said.

"Not really, but I'm hurt that you slapped me," she said.

"I hope you treat my mother as you treat your mother," said Zla ba.

Bde skyid didn't reply but seemed to nod assent.

Bde skyid changed. She got up early to prepare breakfast and did the chores Sgrol ma had done, but it was done in a spirit of hatred.

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Several prosperous years passed. Sgrol ma grew older and couldn't see well, but her son's excellent care meant she was in good health.

Zla ba collected caterpillar fungus in spring and Bde skyid did the necessary farming work.

The family seemed happy.

Unfortunately, it happened so suddenly that the reality was hard to accept. Zla ba died one night without any warning. Relatives and friends came immediately when they received word. Gossip fluttered everywhere: Bde skyid had poisoned him. He had died of an incurable disease.

Villagers helped with the funeral.



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The children were anguished and cried endlessly but could only accept reality.

Sgrol ma was visiting her brother the evil night of Zla ba's death. She didn't know what had happened. Everything was in order when she returned. Bde skyid pleaded with the villagers to keep the secret as long as possible in fear Sgrol ma wouldn't be able to bear it. Even the grandchildren kept the secret.

"Where has Zla ba gone?" asked Sgrol ma.

"He went far away to work," replied Bde skyid.

The answer was exactly the same each time she asked, just like a strip of cloth wrapped around her eyes.

Time passed. Zla ba's death remained a mystery.

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She heard something. The tea was boiling. She put her prayer wheel aside, took the kettle from the fire, and had a very simple breakfast.




TORN BETWEEN TWO LOVERS<sup>1</sup>

G.yu 'brug གཡུ་བླུག (Yongzhong 拥忠)

I traveled to Dar rtse mdo and met my old friend, Rdo rje, quite by accident in a cheap restaurant. He was eating alone so I sat down. After we had each drunk about three bottles, he told me this story.

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 was terribly sleepy on the way to Kunming, but the bumpy track the bus was on shook me from left to right, banging my head against the window whenever I dozed off, making my sleep very fitful.

A man dressed fashionably with a refined expression sat by me. He offered me a brown-paper cigarette and asked if I was a Kunming native.

I said, "I'm from Dkar mdzes County, and I'm going to Kunming to care for my ailing sister in the hospital. She's a student there," and politely returned the cigarette because I do not smoke. We chatted, and he invited me to have lunch with him when the bus reached the usual lunch stop.

I learned that he was a government official in Kunming, his name was Nibushigu, and that he was of the Yi nationality. He gave me his phone number and encouraged me to call him if I needed help. I saw a very nice car pick him up at the bus station after we reached our destination.

I reached the hospital where my seventeen-year-old sister was recovering from an appendectomy. The hospital fee was high and, in a few days, the 3,000 RMB I had brought from home was gone. The doctor told me to prepare another 2,000 RMB because Sister needed to stay in the hospital for at least two additional weeks. I did not tell Sister about this because I did not want her to worry. I also did not inform my family. I knew they had no money to send unless they borrowed from relatives and villagers.

<sup>1</sup> G.yu 'brug (Yongzhong 拥忠). *Torn Between Two Lovers* in Rgyal rong Tibetan Village: Life, Language, and Folklore in Rgyas bzang Village. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 15:98-106.



I mustered my courage and phoned Nibushigu. He said he was very busy and asked me to call him later. I dejectedly returned to the hospital, thinking that he had just made an excuse because we did not know each other well. "Why should he help me - a stranger?" I thought.

Sister sensed my depression when I returned and asked me what had happened.

I said I was only concerned about her studies, told her to read her books, and that once she was discharged from the hospital she should catch up with her classmates.

The next day I reluctantly called Nibushigu again. He said he was pleased that I had called and gave me the name of a restaurant where he said we should meet. I happily went there and found a group of people sitting at a table in a posh restaurant. Nibushigu was sitting at the center of the table in the seat of honor. The waiter told me to join them.

Nibushigu stood as I approached. They all shook hands with me as Nibushigu introduced me. As I ate with them, they offered me a mug of beer. I said that I did not drink but thanked them profusely. Then they urged me to sing. I sang one song. A pretty young woman asked me if I was a professional singer. I was embarrassed by her interest and said that I liked singing but had no singing job.

I accompanied Nibushigu to the toilet a bit later. He handed me 2,500 RMB and told me to keep it as a friend's gift. Astonished, I stood in front of the toilet mirror. I had asked him to lend me 2,500 RMB but, instead, he had given me that sum as an outright gift. I wondered why he gave the money rather than lending it. I worried that he wanted something from me. I returned to the table and continued dinner, my mind full of questions.

"Hi, Rdo rje. My name is Bamo. How's your sister?" asked the woman who had commented on my singing.

"She's fine and will soon return to school," I said.

"You said you're from Dkar mdzes. That's a very nice place, a natural oxygen bar. I was there once. What's your job, or are you still in school?" asked Bamo.



"I'm a social investigator! When I find a job that pays enough, I'll take it, but that hasn't happened yet," I said, laughing at my own joke.

"Are you looking for a job?" asked Bamo.

"Yes, but after my sister gets well," I said.

"What's your phone number? I'll call you later, and we can talk about a job," said Bamo.

"I don't have a cell phone. Please give me your phone number and I'll call you," I said in embarrassment.

I could tell she was a bit surprised but did her best to conceal it.

"How did you become Uncle's friend?" she asked.

I had guessed Nibushigu was her uncle. What a pretty girl! Sharp nose, snow-white teeth, sparkling eyes, and dimples surrounding floating lips. An irrepressible emotion rose within me. I pretended that I had not heard what she said, leaned near her, and asked, "What did you ask?"

"How did you become Uncle's friend? Do you have any relatives working here?" she said.

"Who's your uncle? I don't have any relatives working here," I said, my face turning red.

Bamo explained that Nibushigu was her uncle, he was a city leader, his wife was Tibetan, and that they had lost their only son the year before in a traffic accident. Bamo was living with them and doing restaurant, night-club, and clothing shop business. I learned she was twenty years old, which was older than I was at the time.

A tall man reeking of alcohol interrupted our chat, held Bamo's hand, and said, "This is my girlfriend. I work in the City Planning Bureau. You can call me Brother Wang." He added that if I had any trouble in the city, I should call him and ask for help.

I thanked him and moved away from Bamo and headed to the toilet again. When I reached the toilet, Bamo was standing outside. She gave me a piece of paper with her phone number and told me to call her the next day. Then she left, without her boyfriend. I thanked Nibushigu, who told me to stay in touch.



I then went to another restaurant and got some beef and soup to take to Sister. I also bought a T-shirt for her in a small shop. When I returned to the hospital and entered her room, I found she was reading a book. She got up and told me that the doctor had asked her to pay the hospital charges.

Sister and I took our usual walk after she had eaten the soup and beef. When I asked Sister how much she needed to return to school, she told me she needed about 1,500 RMB.

I said, "I'm going to find a short-term job. This will let me look after you and earn some money."

I paid the hospital charges and called Bamo, who asked me to meet her at the gate of the city zoo. When I got there, she said, "Rdo rje, do you like this city? What are your plans after your sister returns to school?"

"I like this place as much as my home place. People here are very nice. It all gives me a feeling that I'm in my village. I want to find a short-term job while looking after Sister," I replied.

"I have a present for you," said Bamo, taking out a small box from her handbag, and giving it to me. It was a cell phone with a phone card already installed.

"Why should you give me such a present? It must have cost a lot," I said, trying to return it to her, but she was very insistent. I thanked her and invited her to have lunch.

She said, "This is my home place so I'll treat you. When I'm in your place you can treat me."

During lunch, she asked me to come to her nightclub and sing. She said she would pay me 2,300 RMB a month.

I was very happy but told her I had little confidence singing in front of an audience.

"There's no problem with your voice. Practice more and be self-confident," she said.

She then said that she wanted to visit Sister and bought some fruit and other food for her. Sister was puzzled at Bamo's obvious interest in me. After she left, Sister told me to be careful as we took our usual walk.



The nightclub was open from nine PM to midnight. The six male and six female dancers, and five singers (they were all Yi) practiced in the daytime. Their average salary was about 2,000 RMB per month, and the club provided room and board. I usually reached the club at seven PM to practice, but several times I arrived earlier because of Adu, a very talented, kind dancer whose slender figure was admired by all. She was invariably asked to dance solo by the audience. Adu asked me to help her prepare her performance.

I told her that I had no idea about dances, especially modern ones. However, I joined her, and we became good friends. One day, only Adu and I were in the practice room. As her snaky waist moved at top speed, she suddenly fell. I jumped to the stage, held the back of her neck, and asked her if she was injured.

She laughed and said she was fine. I tried to get up, but her left hand was already on the back of my neck.

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"I'm sorry, I was overly excited. Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine. We should throw your jacket away. See? It's got my blood on it," said Adu, picking at my jacket with a pale face. As Adu busily untangled her hair, I rolled up my jacket, worried somebody might see the blood. I was surprised by our carelessness. We had not even closed the door. She took my jacket, went out, and returned twenty minutes later with a new one.

I asked why she had chosen me and not somebody else.

She said, "Every man who approached me wanted a nice time with me, but you just ignored me."

I am still confused by that attitude.

...

"Bamo, I'm afraid I'll forget the lyrics on stage," I whined before it was my turn to sing. As I peeked at the audience, I saw many people sitting, watching the dancing, drinking beer, smoking, pointing at the dancers, and laughing. Some were kissing in the corners.

Bamo said, "Rdo rje, come on! You can do it perfectly," and kissed my cheek in encouragement.

I blushed and gripped the microphone tightly.



"Welcome our young Tibetan singer - Rdo rje! He's a club member and is going to be here for some months. Let's enjoy his song - The Beautiful Red Plateau!"

The music started and I walked onto the stage. As I sang, people came up and offered me some beer, wine, and unknown alcohol. I was drunk by the time I finished. Bamo was waiting for me behind the stage. She was very happy with my performance and gave me a big hug.

I learned that people in that club offered drinks to show respect and admiration. Those who frequented the club generously tipped the waitresses and waiters.

"What happened?" asked Adu in the changing room when the evening performances were over.

"What do you mean?" I said, changing my clothes.

"Bamo hugged you. Some say she kissed you. Why?" said Adu.

"She did it very suddenly. I didn't expect that would happen," I said.

Adu was about to cry. I did not know why. My guess was that she thought I was her boyfriend.

"Rdo rje, what are you doing?" Bamo asked, outside the club changing room.

"I'm about to change clothes. I'm just about to leave. Please wait for me at the club gate," I said.

"What will you do with our boss? Are you dating her?" Adu asked in a trembling voice.

"I have no special relationship with her. Don't be suspicious. She's just very kind to me," I explained.

"Nothing? Then why does she come to see you after work is over?" Adu asked, hugging me.

I told Adu that Bamo often drove me back to the hospital after the club closed, not mentioning that Bamo had given me a phone. When I told Adu I would not be her boyfriend, she insisted that she would not let me not be her boyfriend.

"You took a long time to change clothes. Are you still drunk?" asked Bamo when I got in her car.



I smiled and said nothing. She tried to kiss me as usual when she drove to the hospital gate, and I reacted, as usual, touching my forehead to hers and saying goodbye, then I got out of the car.

The next morning Sister said, "I'll be at school next week. What are your plans?"

"I must stay here at least twenty days. I promised Bamo I would stay here at least a month," I said and brought breakfast to Sister.

A few hours later as I was sleeping deeply, exhausted from the night's activities, my phone rang. It was Bamo. "Rdo rje, please come to the hospital gate," she said.

"Why? I want to sleep," I said impatiently.

"I need your help," said Bamo and hung up.

"Get in. Uncle is inviting you to have a meal at his home," said Bamo when I reached her car.

"Nibushigu has helped me a lot. There's no reason for him to invite me to lunch. Instead, I should invite him to have a meal to thank him for his help," I thought.

When we reached Nibushigu's home, he and his wife warmly welcomed me. During lunch, Nibushigu said that Bamo often talked about me and said I was a very nice young man. He also added that he had felt very happy helping me when I first arrived in Kunming.

After lunch, Nibushigu and his wife said goodbye and went to visit relatives. I was drunk. I tried to get up and return to the hospital, but I could not. I woke up about an hour later and found I was still on the sofa. Bamo had disappeared. I wanted to leave but not without saying goodbye.

"Where have you been?" I asked when Bamo eventually returned.

"I went to the hospital to take food to your sister. How are you?" said Bamo.

"I'm good. Thanks for caring about my sister," I said. As I stood up she started to cry. I was confused and asked, "What's happening, Bamo?"

"I broke up with my boyfriend because of you!" Bamo sobbed.



"What? Did I tell you to break up with your boyfriend?" I asked.

"No, but I like you. I love you. I want to be with you. That's why I broke up with my boyfriend," she wept.

"I'm sorry I disappointed you. My parents won't allow me to have a girlfriend who isn't Tibetan," I said.

"Do you look down on me?" questioned Bamo.

"No, this is the custom in my home area," I said and then explained how negatively villagers treat cross-ethnic marriage in my village. Though I was trying to persuade her not to have a crush on me, we started working on each other's clothes as soon as her lips touched my ear.

After I had worked for about two weeks at the club, Sister was ready to return to school. I asked for half of my salary, gave the money to Sister, and started staying at the club's dormitory while maintaining a relationship with both Bamo and Adu.

The nightclub business was good. One day, Bamo invited all the performers to lunch. Adu sat by me. I was getting drunk. Adu stopped me from drinking more and asked me to return to the dormitory. Bamo stopped her and said that she had a relationship with me.

"Rdo rje, you can't have two girls at the same time. You must choose between Bamo and me," said Adu angrily.

"Rdo rje, you have no choice. Maybe I'll be a mother after a few months," said Bamo.

My friend stopped Bamo and signaled for me to leave. I regretted everything and planned to leave the city. I went to see my sister the day after this unpleasant event and told her I would leave and send her the money she needed after I got home. I then went to her head teacher and asked for help with Sister's fees. The teacher said he would help.

I told Bamo I was leaving because one of my uncles was very sick, and that I had to return to care for him since he had no children. She was very upset but decided to pay me a month's wage because of the club's excellent earnings.



The club members had a banquet for my departure, but I only drank a little beer. I knew both Bamo and Adu would try to talk to me after dinner. I said goodbye to the group and Adu followed me to the bus station hotel. She was very quiet that evening. We went to bed and got up at nine PM because she had to return to the club. She said she would not enjoy life without me.

Bamo came to see me at eleven PM. We chatted and held each other until I had to go catch the bus the next morning at six AM.

Nibushigu had reached Chengdu before I left Kunming. I phoned him on the way back home. He said that he would like to visit my home someday and told me to keep in touch.

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This story had taken about an hour, and we had drunk another couple of bottles of beer apiece. My phone rang. It was my older brother. He said his wife had just given birth. I was glad to have a new nephew and told him I would be home soon. I said goodbye to Rdo rje. As I left, he ordered another two bottles of beer.



A COLLEGE STUDENT<sup>1</sup>

'Phrin las nyi ma འཕྲིན་ལས་ནི་མ། (Chenlinima 陈立尼玛)

A friend told me about his friend's experience studying in Chengdu, which typifies higher education for many young Tibetan men studying in such cities as Zi ling (Xining), Lanzhou, and Chengdu who, for the first time, are away from the close supervision of relatives and teachers.

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## BEGINNINGS

The morning of the day Dpal 'bum first started for Chengdu City, his mother, Mtsho mo, got up earlier than usual and prepared food. His stepfather, whom he called Uncle Bzang kho, had also risen and stepped to the back of the room where he burned the leaves of an aromatic plant to beseech the deities for blessings, particularly hoping that Dpal 'bum would successfully graduate in two years. Bzang kho awakened Dpal 'bum and told him to have breakfast, which included beef, bread, and milk tea. It was a common Tibetan meal.

Bzang kho said, "Dpal 'bum, I found a school for you. You can now realize that dream you tell us about every day. Pack up after you finish eating."

Dpal 'bum was so excited by this unexpected announcement that he could hardly believe it. He gazed at his mother, who silently nodded yes. Suspicion erased from his mind, he darted into his bedroom and hurriedly packed. Sitting at the dining table, Bzang kho and Mtsho mo smiled. After a few minutes, Dpal 'bum rushed out of his room and shouted, "Look, I'm ready!"

Bzang kho took some money from his safe, handed it to Dpal 'bum, and said, "Take care of yourself, kid!"

Dpal 'bum's mother was almost in tears as she carried her son's bag. As they walked to the bus stop, she repeatedly urged him to take care of himself, chant mantras and scriptures on the way, and

<sup>1</sup> 'Phrin las nyi ma. 2012. A College Student. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 21:367-386.



work hard in school. Dpal 'bum nodded, got on the bus, and left with, "Goodbye, Mother!"

Because there was no direct regular bus from Pad ma County<sup>1</sup> Town to Chengdu, he first took a bus to Rnga ba County Town.<sup>2</sup> He found a seat by a Tibetan woman who sat by a window, but they had no conversation. Time ticked by as Dpal 'bum dozed, listened to music on his MP3 player, and looked out the window. Four hours later, he reached Rnga ba County Town where he disembarked, purchased a bus ticket to Chengdu the next day, found a cheap inn, and spent a quiet night alone.

He started off again the next morning. Nearly a day was required to reach Chengdu. In the evening, Mtsho mo's cell phone rang. It was Dpal 'bum, announcing that he had reached Chengdu, and had decided to find the school the next morning. Dpal 'bum's mother felt relieved.

It was a sunny September morning when Dpal 'bum woke. He put on his Tibetan robe and was soon walking through the gate of Southwest University for Nationalities. By the road leading from the gate was a booth for new students who were told what to do. Dpal 'bum filled out a form and paid his tuition and registration fees. The clerk then took him and some other new students to their dormitory and classroom and showed them around the school. The class advisor held a class meeting that evening to familiarize the students with each other and the university. Dpal 'bum sat by Rdo rje, who was from Dkar mdzes Prefecture, Sichuan Province. Rdo rje was eager to know everything, Dpal 'bum was easygoing, and so they soon became close friends. Dpal 'bum's mother and stepfather were sincerely happy when their son reported his busy day later that evening.

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<sup>1</sup> Pad ma County is located in Mgo log (Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province.

<sup>2</sup> Rnga ba County is located in Rnga ba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province.



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THE FIRST TWO MONTHS AT UNIVERSITY

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The new semester began with two weeks of military training. Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje were both assigned to the same class. PLA soldiers came to the school to teach the new students. Wearing newly issued camouflage uniforms, Dpal 'bum had few breaks and little time for meals. Furthermore, the sweltering temperatures of Chengdu City made Dpal 'bum think he would die of heat exhaustion. He and Rdo rje headed to their dorm or cafeteria after training, utterly spent. They felt thoroughly liberated when the training finished two weeks later.

They had both chosen the challenging subject of Tibetan history as their major. In fact, Dpal 'bum could attend school not because of an exam score, but because his stepfather had bribed the appropriate officials. On account of his lower level of knowledge, he was far behind the others in his class. Actually, he understood little of what the teachers said.

Dpal 'bum resolved to study hard and with Rdo rje's help, Dpal 'bum's Tibetan improved to the extent that he could write short poems. He sent one of his creations to a Chengdu publisher who printed it in an anthology and sent him a complimentary copy.

Dpal 'bum was exultant and decided to treat Rdo rje that night to celebrate. They went out and found a small restaurant. While sitting in the corner, a voice told them not to order. It was Nyi ma from Dkar mdzes. He had played basketball with Dpal 'bum the day before and now was with two other Tibetans, enjoying an expensive meal and drinking beer. Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje were compelled to join them, as custom dictated. Dpal 'bum then enjoyed not only wonderful food but also drank beer with them. All of them, except Rdo rje, were drunk after several bundles of beer, which made Rdo rje uneasy. He asked Dpal 'bum to return to school several times, but he refused. Finally, Rdo rje helped Dpal 'bum to their dorm at midnight without saying goodbye to the others.

Dpal 'bum was very drunk. As they stumbled back to the dormitory building, Dpal 'bum boasted that he had become a famous poet. "Rdo rje, you must buy me a bottle of beer, otherwise I can't



move," said Dpal 'bum in a quavering voice, rolling on the ground. Rdo rje was annoyed but did as Dpal 'bum demanded. Later, when they finally staggered into their dorm room, Rdo rje kindly helped Dpal 'bum to his bed, took the empty bottle from his hand, put him on his bed, and undressed him.

At midnight, Rdo rje woke up with a raging thirst. He saw Dpal 'bum was out of his bed and urinating in the toilet. He wasn't worried, because he knew Dpal 'bum was conscious. Rdo rje drank a cup of water and resumed sleeping.

The next day at around noon, Rdo rje found Dpal 'bum still in bed and realized that he was still drunk. Rdo rje woke him up and told him it was now afternoon. Though he had missed four classes that morning, Dpal 'bum thought it was worth the pleasant time that he had spent with Nyi ma and the others. After finishing lunch in the school cafeteria, Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje studied together in the classroom.

Later, Nyi ma called and invited Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje to a bar to drink. Rdo rje refused, but Dpal 'bum accepted. They drank, danced, and sang. Nyi ma's girlfriend, Sgron ma, was also there. She spoke Tibetan mixed with Chinese. In time, Dpal 'bum and Nyi ma became close friends, often cut classes, and spent an increasing amount of time together outside the university. Rdo rje knew how Nyi ma behaved in their home place and advised Dpal 'bum not to associate with him.

#### DPAL 'BUM'S GIRLFRIEND

Dpal 'bum felt unhappy and lonely at being single. Nyi ma realized that Dpal 'bum was depressed and suggested he find a girlfriend. In the beginning, Dpal 'bum was too shy to agree, though he was extremely eager. Nyi ma's persistent persuasion led Dpal 'bum to agree and Nyi ma then brought a girl with Sgron ma to the school sports ground where Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje were playing basketball. Sitting on the ground, Nyi ma shouted for Dpal 'bum to join them. Dpal 'bum stopped playing and ran to Nyi ma after ensuring he had been called. Dpal 'bum tried to hide his curiosity and bashfulness.



"Who is she?" Dpal 'bum murmured in Nyi ma's right ear.

"She's the one I want to introduce you to," Nyi ma replied lightly.

Sgron ma broke in, and said, "This is my best friend, Zla sgron, who is from Mtsho sngon Province. We're classmates."

Dpal 'bum continued to be shy and nervous but bravely managed, "I'm Dpal 'bum, nice to meet you, Zla sgron!" and stretched out his right hand. After they shook hands, Nyi ma and his girlfriend left to give Dpal 'bum and Zla sgron time to become acquainted. This was the first time Dpal 'bum had been introduced to a girl by a matchmaker. While Dpal 'bum was quiet, Zla sgron was easygoing and kindhearted. Dpal 'bum immediately fell head over heels in love with her. She asked Dpal 'bum about his hometown and past but asked no questions about their future relationship, which made him feel anxious.

He then courageously asked, "Do you have a boyfriend now?"

Zla sgron felt taken aback and wondered why Dpal 'bum asked this.

"No!" she said, not looking at Dpal 'bum's face.

Dpal 'bum did not pursue this. Instead, he moved closer to Zla sgron and began chatting. She took her cell phone from her trousers' pocket and switched it off. Dpal 'bum's reticence had vanished. They were soon sitting very close to each other and chatting nonstop.

As darkness fell, Nyi ma and Sgron ma approached from a distance. Dpal 'bum stood, looked at the school gate, and asked Zla sgron for her phone number, wrote it down, and said, "Would you like to be my girlfriend now?"

She silently lowered her head in embarrassed consent.

By this time, Nyi ma and Sgron ma had arrived and suggested they go to a bar for a drink. They then took a taxi to a fancy bar where Nyi ma and Dpal 'bum were regulars. After Zla sgron had several cups of liquor, she was confused, kissed Dpal 'bum's cheek, put an arm around his neck, and said, "I want you to protect me. I hope you'll give me some proof of your love."

These words were as though carved on Dpal 'bum's half-drunk heart.



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DPAL 'BUM'S HOLIDAY PLAN

The winter holiday was drawing near and Dpal 'bum was wallowing in an unoccupied, indolent life with his new girlfriend. His teachers told him countless times to prepare for the end-of-term exams, but their words fell on deaf ears. Dpal 'bum's head teacher then decided to call his parents but did not when Dpal 'bum promised to pass all his examinations. Dpal 'bum was amazed when he at long last opened his textbook and began reviewing. His books were new and he understood almost nothing. It was as though he had never seen those books before.

Two days before the exams, Dpal 'bum had no other choice but to make cheat sheets. He then passed the exams, reported his scores to his family over the phone, and asked for a reward from his stepfather. Bzang kho and Mtsho mo were delighted with the news and put 800 *yuan* in Dpal 'bum's bank account the next day. They waited hopefully for Dpal 'bum's return. Dpal 'bum was not satisfied with the amount of his reward because he wanted to buy an expensive cell phone for his girlfriend as a birthday gift. He decided to take a part-time job and asked for work at the bar where he and Nyi ma often drank. The proprietor knew Dpal 'bum and his friends often frequented his bar and arranged a night job as a waiter that paid twelve *yuan* an hour. Dpal 'bum was soon absorbed in his work and did not want to return home during the winter holiday. He phoned home and said, "I won't return. I registered for a training class to improve my Chinese." The seriousness of Dpal 'bum's tone convinced his parents who agreed that Dpal 'bum should stay in Chengdu. Meanwhile, he continued working in the bar.

## NEW YEAR'S DAY

Two days before the Tibetan New Year, the house decorations and food preparations were done. The only thing Dpal 'bum's mother couldn't do was set off firecrackers. As in most Amdo Tibetan places, firecrackers were set off by men. Bzang kho had left to make purchases. Mtsho mo then persuaded Dpal 'bum to return to set off



firecrackers.

On New Year's Eve, Bzang kho returned home with many items, including a New Year gift for Dpal 'bum of an expensive warm sheepskin robe. Dpal 'bum had never owned such a robe. Wrapped in his new robe, he and his parents put out the food they had prepared, covering a table with mutton, beef, pork, meat dumplings, fried bread, and various fruit on wooden plates. They then enjoyed a delicious meal.

Most local Tibetans did not sleep that night because they believed that the New Year began at exactly midnight when everyone started visiting each other. Dpal 'bum had little interest in this. Instead, he stayed at home and helped greet visitors. Many of Bzang kho's workmates came to visit and drank Chinese liquor. One of Bzang kho's friends asked Dpal 'bum to drink with them, but Mtsho mo and Bzang kho said he should not. They thought Dpal 'bum had never touched liquor or smoked. Bzang kho and his visitors drank until dawn while Dpal 'bum and Mtsho mo served them.

#### DPAL 'BUM'S PLEDGE

In late winter, the sun shone in the lofty sky. The weather was warming, hinting at spring's approach. Dpal 'bum's family was enjoying the sunshine on their verandah one day after finishing a good lunch. Dpal 'bum's cell phone rang and his friend, A du, asked him to play basketball at the local primary school sports ground. As he was leaving, Mtsho mo asked him curiously who had invited him. Dpal 'bum's mother had repeatedly told him to avoid bad friends. Dpal 'bum didn't tell her it was A du, a man Dpal 'bum's age who had been expelled from school and disowned by his parents for unforgivable behavior. Dpal 'bum hastily said, "It's one of my schoolmates," and hurried away.

A du and others were already playing basketball with some monks from Rnga ba County when Dpal 'bum reached the sports ground. A few hours later, their intense competition was over, and Dpal 'bum and A du had lost. Most players left because of impending darkness. Only Dpal 'bum and A du remained on the sports ground. A



du handed Dpal 'bum a cigarette and took another for himself. That was the first time Dpal 'bum had smoked during the holiday for he was locally regarded as an upright student. They were exhausted and lay on one side of the basketball court. After a while, A du took Dpal 'bum to a bar near the school and asked him to drink. Dpal 'bum found it hard to refuse.

Hours passed, and Dpal 'bum decided that his mother would surely have gone to bed so he returned home. He was conscious that he had drunk more than A du. He slowed and quietly entered the home. Unexpectedly the light came on and Mtsho mo yelled, "Is it my son, Dpal 'bum?"

Dpal 'bum said nothing, fearing Mtsho mo would smell the beer on his breath. When Mtsho mo approached, she immediately detected the odor of beer. Tears streamed from her eyes. She knew beating or scolding Dpal 'bum was useless since he was no longer a boy. Dpal 'bum regretfully tried to persuade her to stop weeping, and finally, Dpal 'bum was also now sobbing, embraced his mother, and vowed to stop smoking and drinking.

After a while, Mtsho mo handed Dpal 'bum a bowl of dumplings and returned to bed.

#### RETURN TO SCHOOL

A new term started with spring's approach. With a pledge to not drink and smoke, Dpal 'bum returned to school for a new beginning. The school had assigned Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje to another building further from the classrooms. As he unpacked, Dpal 'bum felt confused because the newly assigned dorm was less comfortable than the previous one. This change disgruntled all the students. Dpal 'bum led them to the teacher in charge of their class, but nothing could be done. The school said that the building Dpal 'bum and others had stayed in had been designated for new students. Hopelessly, Dpal 'bum and others left, returned to their assigned dormitory, and unhappily settled in.

By afternoon, Dpal 'bum had forgotten this misfortune, since his girlfriend would soon arrive from Zi ling. Two hours before her



train reached the station, Dpal 'bum was already in the waiting room. Two days earlier, Zla sgron had celebrated her birthday with her parents. Meanwhile, Dpal 'bum had prepared a gift of a cell phone that had cost 2,000 RMB and was eager to present it.

Zla sgron's train arrived, and passengers crowded out of the exit. Dpal 'bum held a small wrapped box and carefully looked for Zla sgron. In the crowd of strange moving faces, Dpal 'bum eventually found her, rushed over, and said, "Are you tired from the long trip?" taking her luggage.

"Yes!" she replied, "Let's find a hotel. I want to rest."

Dpal 'bum handed his gift to her with, "Hope it's not too late to wish you a happy birthday!"

Delighted, Zla sgron embraced Dpal 'bum and, arm in arm, they strolled to a nearby hotel, laughing and joking.

#### A LIE

A month passed and winter's frost gave way to warm summer weather that encouraged people to remove their heavy clothes. Wearing a white T-shirt, Dpal 'bum was delighted by the weather, but anxious about the coming weekend's expenditures. He had not planned his allowance well. He attended four hours of Tibetan classes in the morning and decided to play basketball on an empty stomach. The sports ground was full of students because the weekend was approaching. Dpal 'bum dashed directly to the basketball court and joined a group of five Chinese students. After several rounds, Nyi ma and three other boys showed up and joined them. Dpal 'bum had met Nyi ma only a few times since the beginning of the term for he had promised his mother that he would not associate with bad students.

"Why haven't you called me recently? Did you forget your friend?" Nyi ma asked Dpal 'bum during a break.

"No, I've been busy with homework," Dpal 'bum fibbed.

Nyi ma laughed and the others joined in. "You never do homework! Anyway, we will hold a circle dance here tomorrow night. I hope you will come with your girlfriend," Nyi ma said, handing him a cigarette.



Dpal 'bum said, "Thanks, but I've quit smoking. I'll be glad to come here tomorrow night," and then he left for his dorm, wondering how to get money for the next evening. He could only think of lying to his stepfather, so he called Bzang kho and said that the school had ordered each student to contribute 1,000 RMB.

"Didn't they collect 500 RMB last month?" Bzang kho asked suspiciously.

"That was a class requirement, but this time our school has demanded this and urged us to do it as soon as possible," Dpal 'bum answered.

Bzang kho was convinced and said, "OK, I'll put a deposit in your account tomorrow."

Dpal 'bum then rushed into his dorm room with a yell that frightened and roused Rdo rje from his afternoon nap. Dpal 'bum borrowed 200 RMB from Rdo rje with a promise that he would return it the next day. Dpal 'bum's empty stomach was grumbling for he hadn't eaten the whole day. He then called Zla sgron and enjoyed a nice supper with her.

#### CIRCLE DANCING

In the late morning of the following day, as sunbeams were warmly flowing through the window into Dpal 'bum's dorm room, he roused from his two-tiered bunk bed and sleepily rubbed his eyes that seemed to have been glued shut. He got up and put on a freshly washed shirt and clean pants. He knew that his roommates had already left to study and conduct other personal business. Dpal 'bum walked to the student canteen by himself after washing his hands and face. At the entrance of the student dining hall, he accidentally met Zla sgron, who was still in her pajamas, holding a thermos in her right hand and two pieces of bread in a plastic bag in the other hand.

"Dpal 'bum, why are you staring like that?" Zla sgron asked in surprise, waving a hand before Dpal 'bum's eyes.

He jumped as though frightened, and said, "No reason! Have you eaten?" brushing aside a strand of Zla sgron's hair with his right hand.



Zla sgron munched on a piece of bread and said, "Ha! I am now!" while smiling cutely.

Dpal 'bum took her thermos and led her to the dining room since he did not want to eat alone. Afterward, they headed to Zla sgron's dorm so she could dress appropriately for the coming circle dance. Dpal 'bum waited outside the dorm, checking his cell phone.

After half an hour, he was tired of waiting.

Eventually, Zla sgron emerged wearing sunglasses and approached Dpal 'bum, who joked, "Were you washing your face or your body?" hinting that he had been waiting a long time.

"This is what girls are like!" replied Zla sgron.

It was still two hours before the event began. To kill time, they walked to a cybercafé near the school and spent time using chat programs and playing computer games. Since Dpal 'bum had parted with Nyi ma and stopped drinking, the Internet bar had become his favorite hangout. He spent most of his allowance on computer games and was now addicted to them. When Nyi ma called, they left for school. Many Tibetan students in Tibetan dance robes had made a large circle and were ready to start.

A big fire customarily blazed in the middle of the circle, but this had been replaced by a heavy sound box. The school would not permit a fire. Many dancers and a large audience had gathered. The sound of applause was ceaseless, encouraging Dpal 'bum, Zla sgron, and the other dancers. The onlookers, mesmerized by the strong rhythm of the Tibetan songs and the dancers' nimble steps, formed a large circle and tried to imitate the performers' steps.

After about two hours, the dancers and bystanders were ready to leave, including Dpal 'bum and Zla sgron. Their smiles proved it had been a happy time.

#### DPAL 'BUM'S MISFORTUNE

Approximately two months into the final semester of studies, students in Dpal 'bum's grade were intensively preparing their graduation papers after nearly two years of study. They would soon leave the university, hopefully with a two-year college degree. One



Friday evening, Dpal 'bum was returning to his dorm after eating. When he got to the school gate, he saw Zla sgron there, talking and laughing with a boy. They were holding hands, unaware that Dpal 'bum was observing them.

He hung back, pretending not to see them, but then overwhelmed by indignation, he shoved in front of Zla sgron and the boy and demanded, "What are you doing here, Zla sgron?"

She panicked, not knowing what to say.

"Who is he?" Dpal 'bum angrily demanded.

Zla sgron made no response as tears streamed down Dpal 'bum's cheeks. She dared not even so much as glance at him.

Enraged, Dpal 'bum ripped a necklace that Zla sgron had given him from around his neck, flung it on the ground in front of Zla sgron, and rushed to his dorm where he lay on his bed, wrapped in a quilt so tightly that he could hardly breathe. Rolling from side to side of his bed, he was unable to think about anything except Zla sgron and that boy. Tears streamed from his eyes. It was the first time he had wept over a girl.

Eventually, he decided to go to a bar for a few drinks to ease his pain. When something sad and unbearable happened, alcohol helped him forget. The bar was full of students when he entered. He chose an empty seat in the corner and ordered three bottles of beer. He noticed Nyi ma's girlfriend nearby, drinking by herself, looking unhappy and lonely. After she approached Dpal 'bum and greeted him, they sat together and began sharing their troubles, while their table gradually became littered with an ever-increasing number of beer bottles. Eventually, around midnight, they both vomited.

Dpal 'bum then found a hotel near the bar, booked a room, and helped Sgron ma up to the room. When he woke up the next morning, he found Sgron ma sleeping by him. They were both naked. Embarrassed, he dressed and left without waking her. On the way to his dorm, Dpal 'bum was terribly worried Nyi ma would find out. He suddenly stopped walking and dashed back to the hotel to urge Sgron ma not to tell Nyi ma that she had slept with him. As he rushed into the room, he found Nyi ma there, arguing with Sgron ma. Dpal 'bum quietly backed out and closed the door, alerting Nyi ma, who flung



open the door, grabbed his shirt collar, and demanded, "What did you do with my girlfriend last night?"

Enraged when Dpal 'bum didn't answer, he slammed his fist into Dpal 'bum's face. Sgron ma then grabbed Nyi ma and stopped him from landing more blows.

Dpal 'bum knew Nyi ma had been his best friend at one point and that the mistake was his. "I am the cause of this. I did it to take revenge. Don't scold him," Sgron ma said, which calmed Nyi ma.

Nyi ma shouted, "Get out! We're no longer friends!"

Sgron ma persuaded Dpal 'bum to leave. At a loss, Dpal 'bum left, realizing he had lost a good friend and a new lover, and that he had broken his vow.

#### A TEACHER'S CRITICISM

From that day, gloom and disappointment filled Dpal 'bum's heart and mind. He frequently skipped class, was often out drinking at night, and then returned in the early morning to sleep the entire day in his dorm. Sometimes, he bothered other students when he got drunk and fought with them. He only called his family when he wanted cash. Everything he did at that time suggested that he had been possessed by a demon.

Late one night, as Dpal 'bum was very drunk while staggering to his dorm that he bumped into a stranger. "Why are you bumping me?" the stranger inquired sharply, fixing his eyes on Dpal 'bum. Everything was hazy and cold. Dpal 'bum squinted but did not recognize the man.

"You bumped into me, man!" Dpal 'bum replied after a long pause.

The man grabbed Dpal 'bum's neck with one hand and said, "Let's see how brave you are!" and punched Dpal 'bum in the belly.

Dpal 'bum fought back and, as they rolled on the ground, two men dashed up from behind. One struck Dpal 'bum's forehead with a brick. Dpal 'bum fell unconscious and the men fled. After he regained consciousness, he stood. One of his shoes was missing so he hopped about, searching for it. His forehead was unbearably painful and



oozing blood, so he wrapped his jacket around it. He gave up searching for his shoe and continued to his dorm.

After a few minutes, a flashlight shone on him, blinding him. An old man who worked as a school guard wrapped in a huge green military coat, approached and asked, "What are you doing here?" in a heavy Sichuan Chinese dialect.

Dpal 'bum turned and replied, "Nothing! It's OK!"

The old man was worried when he saw blood soaking the jacket around Dpal 'bum's head, and convinced Dpal 'bum to go to a nearby clinic. "Let me help you," the guard said kindly.

Dpal 'bum initially refused, but eventually accepted the old man's assistance, as the increasing pain made him vomit. Dpal 'bum returned to his dorm room after a doctor had stitched the cut in his head and wrapped the wound in white gauze. He went directly to bed.

In the afternoon when students had finished their morning classes, Rdo rje, rushed into the room and awakened Dpal 'bum, who sat up and touched his injured head. The wound was no longer as painful as before. "How's your head? Teacher Bsod nams ordered me to bring you to his office," Rdo rje said in concern.

Teacher Bsod nams was Dpal 'bum's favorite teacher and his class's headteacher. He was kindhearted and regarded all his disobedient students with profound patience.

"This time I will be scolded," Dpal 'bum thought on the way to the office. He hung back as he reached the office, feeling fearful.

Teacher Bsod nams appeared in the hall with a cup of boiled water. "I haven't seen you for a long time, Dpal 'bum. Come in," Teacher Bsod nams said as Dpal 'bum stood still, his head bent, standing rigidly at the door.

Dpal 'bum followed.

"What happened to you? You're getting worse and worse!" Teacher Bsod nams shouted and turned to Dpal 'bum so suddenly that Dpal 'bum was frightened. Teacher Bsod nams was now bellowing, announcing to all in the hall that he was scolding Dpal 'bum. The criticism lasted for almost half an hour. His tone slowly became gentler and slower. "The school was going to dismiss you, but I stopped them. Now you can go," said Teacher Bsod nams,



disappointment lining his face.

Dpal 'bum started to leave without knowing what to do, tears streaming down his face.

"Dpal 'bum, you only have one month left and this better not happen again. I'm watching you," Teacher Bsod nams said seriously.

Dpal 'bum appreciated this show of concern and left.

#### THE FINAL EXAMINATION

The sun had vanished behind ominous clouds, taking a break from warming the city. The air took on the feel of rain. Dpal 'bum snored, wrapped in a thin blanket. His other roommates had departed for their classroom early to nervously prepare for the final examination. When it was time for breakfast, Rdo rje returned to his dorm room with some bread and a thermos full of boiled water. "Sleepy Dpal 'bum, get up!" said Rdo rje jokingly. "You'll be late if you continue sleeping. I've brought you some bread."

Dpal 'bum stuck his head out of the blanket and rolled over in bed. "What time is it, Rdo rje?" Dpal 'bum asked, reluctantly raised his head, and then walked to the toilet wearing only his underwear.

"We have only thirty minutes!" replied Rdo rje when Dpal 'bum returned. Dpal 'bum put on a fashionable jacket with many pockets and combed his hair.

"Let's go. I'll eat the bread on the way," said Dpal 'bum hurriedly. They went downstairs and headed to the teaching building where examinees were crowded at the gate.

"What's the first subject?" Dpal 'bum mumbled, his mouth half full of bread.

"Tibetan. Good luck on your test!" replied Rdo rje, murmuring scriptures.

Invigilators were already at the gate. After sternly announcing the rules of the test, they unbolted the door. Rdo rje and Dpal 'bum were put in different examination rooms, annoying Dpal 'bum. He found his seat. Everything was so quiet that he could hear his heart throbbing. Two teachers invigilated each examination room. After the teachers declared the start of the test, they handed out the papers,



Dpal 'bum was taken aback by the difficulty of the test and regretted not reviewing. He had arrogantly expected that the Tibetan test would be no challenge for him, especially since he had published a poem. Examinees in the same room were deeply absorbed in the test, which made Dpal 'bum uneasy and impatient. He hoped time would pass rapidly.

After the exams, all the examinees, including Rdo rje, were discussing the test in front of the building. "How did you do?" Rdo rje asked Dpal 'bum in concern.

Dpal 'bum looked extraordinarily depressed and did not reply. Noticing his discomfort, Rdo rje immediately changed the subject and suggested, "Let's go back to the dorm and pack our belongings."

When they entered their room, the other roommates had already started packing and were excitedly commenting on how they would soon be back at home. "Don't be depressed," said Rdo rje, putting his arm around Dpal 'bum's shoulder.

As Dpal 'bum packed a few clothes into a suitcase, he realized his bookcase had only one book. Depression and remorse flooding his heart, he ascended the stairs to the roof of his dormitory building without finishing packing. Atop the roof, he recalled the past two years. As he watched students below leaving, tears flowed down his cheeks, an expression of his sincere regret, but it was too late to change anything.

Three days later, the school announced their scores and praised those who had excelled. Dpal 'bum had failed his exams and was thus unable to get a graduation certificate.

#### BACK HOME

The graduates separated in different directions, returning to their homes as their schooling ended. Dpal 'bum terminated his college life in deep despair and bitter remorse. He packed all his belongings in a case with two wheels on each side, and trudged to the bus stop, pulling his suitcase with his right hand.

The school atmosphere was tranquil. It seemed as though birds were the main actors in the schoolyard, for the only thing that



could be heard was their chirping and the flapping of their wings. Walking along a gravel path to the school gate, he was excited about returning home but, at the same time embarrassed, for he had learned nothing and had no graduation certificate. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Zla sgron carrying a huge black bag on her back. Dpal 'bum pretended not to see her and chose an alternative path, but she caught up with him at the gate. "Dpal 'bum, are you going home?" Zla sgron blurted.

He turned without making a response, and saw Zla sgron panting, standing rigidly behind him. The big, heavy bag on her back and the blazing summer sun made her sweat profusely. "Yeah, what would I do if I didn't return home?" Dpal 'bum replied, his face's dark expression showing he was still angry with her.

She realized how he felt, but the heavy bag on her back prompted her to say, "Could you escort me if we are going the same way to the bus stop?" staring at Dpal 'bum emotionlessly.

When Dpal 'bum saw she really needed help, he took her heavy pack, put it on his back, and then silently handed her the handle to his suitcase. They then went to the street to hail a cab. As they stood silently on the curb, a green taxi stopped. Dpal 'bum loaded their luggage in the boot, they clambered into the taxi, and twenty minutes later they reached the bus stop. Putting Zla sgron's black bag on the ground, Dpal 'bum said, "Take care of yourself. I'm leaving."

Zla sgron was embarrassed and replied, "Please, phone me, I'm sorry about..." but dared not look at Dpal 'bum's face.

"It's finished. Don't mention it," responded Dpal 'bum, without allowing her to complete her last sentence, and left, dragging his suitcase. Tears streamed down Zla sgron's cheeks, spattering noisily onto the pavement, a display of regret Dpal 'bum was not there to witness.

Dpal 'bum reached his hometown after two days of travel. His mother had come to meet him. "Were there any problems on the way?" she asked. Seeing new wrinkles on her face, he realized that his mother had aged as if ten years had passed.

"It was a smooth trip," answered Dpal 'bum, afraid she would



ask about his diploma since that was the only thing she would understand that proved he had obtained something of value from school. He entered his home followed by his mother. The walls and ceiling were spotted with dust and smoke. The home was darker than before. Nobody had cleaned it, as his mother was not tall enough to reach the ceiling. Dpal 'bum put his luggage in a corner, pleased that his stepfather was absent.

"Mother, where is Uncle?" he asked.

His mother stepped from the kitchen holding two dishes of food and said, "He went to Zi ling for a meeting two days ago and probably won't return today." After placing the food on a table, she headed back to the kitchen for more dishes.

His stepfather's absence made Dpal 'bum a bit relaxed and gave him more time to ponder how to explain his disastrous school results. After he finished eating, Dpal 'bum said he was going to see a friend in the county town, and left.

His mother was extremely curious about what was in Dpal 'bum's suitcase and opened it. To her disappointment, she saw neither certificate nor gifts, only a few old clothes, kindling her suspicions.

It was almost midnight when Dpal 'bum returned. He gently pushed open the unbolted door, and tiptoed in, trying his best not to awaken his mother. As he reached his bedroom, he found his mother weeping on his bed. He turned on the light and ran to her. She immediately wiped away her tears with her sleeve.

"Mother, what is it?" Dpal 'bum asked quietly, patting her back with his hand.

"It's you! Where is your graduation certificate?" she asked in a quivering voice.

"Mother, I... how did you know?" Dpal 'bum said, then confided everything, except his broken vows. His mother burst into wails, tears falling on her robe like pearl beads.

"Your uncle will be furious," she concluded and left for her bed. Dpal 'bum was again convinced of how much she loved him since she had not scolded him.

The following day Dpal 'bum cleaned the home from top to



bottom to please his parents. The rooms were as clean as new. Dpal 'bum and his mother patiently waited for Bzang kho, who arrived in the evening with two of his workmates. He was delighted to see the home so neat and clean and praised Dpal 'bum, whom he introduced to his companions, adding that he had just graduated from university. His workmates were glad to see Dpal 'bum and suitably impressed that he was a college graduate.

After a while, Bzang kho asked Dpal 'bum to show them his diploma. Dpal 'bum and his mother were shocked and their faces turned red. Bzang kho pressed Dpal 'bum to bring it quickly. At that moment Dpal 'bum's mother said that he had lost it.

Bzang kho immediately stood and shouted, "What? You lost it. Are you still a child?"

This frightened the guests, who unsuccessfully tried to calm him. Dpal 'bum lowered his head, sat on a chair near the TV holding a cup of tea, and listened to his stepfather's criticism with a trembling heart. In such an embarrassing situation, the guests left.

Bzang kho's shouts still filled the room as he poured out his disappointment.

After about two hours of shouting, Bzang kho was exhausted and hoarse, and then wearily walked to the bedroom he shared with Dpal 'bum's mother.




SET FREE BY TRAGEDY<sup>1</sup>

G.yang mtsho skyid གཡང་མཚོ་སྒྱིད།

I was born in a rural community - Hor Village, Tsho drug (Cuozhou) Township, Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Mtsho sngon Province, China. I graduated from Mtsho sngon Normal University with a BA in English and Tibetan and then found my current job, teaching English at Gcan tsha County Number One Nationalities' Middle School. I enjoy writing stories because they explore social phenomena in ways that other writing cannot. This story is based on the life of a traditional Tibetan woman who married according to her parents' arrangement. When struck by disaster, she was at first helpless, but eventually broke with tradition and achieved success, creating a comfortable life for herself and her family.

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he winter sky was gray and windy, wrapping the village in faint smoke pouring from the chimneys of each house. The Yellow River was very blue and calm, even though a harsh wind blew across it. Despite the bad weather, I was excited and couldn't wait to visit Gang skyid from my village, Hor. Gang skyid wasn't famous, beautiful, or rich. She was a farmer, but her life experiences were worth recording and sharing.

I was full of expectations as I walked to her home to interview her, but she wasn't there. She was in the *ma Ni* room, so I immediately went there and found her sitting in the sun, spinning a big prayer wheel by pulling a thick, old rope together with other elder women. They were holding the rope tightly as their hands moved up and down rhythmically. Tugged in this way, the huge prayer wheel rotated slowly in front of the women, as though demonstrating the eternal nature of samsara.

Gang skyid nodded slightly and thoughtfully when I asked if I could interview her. I sat by her with a thankful face and then realized her eyes were brimming with tears. I felt my throat become dry as I gazed at her. Her face creased as she closed her eyes, and tears ran

<sup>1</sup> G.yang mtsho skyid. 2012. Set Free by Tragedy. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 21:387-395.



down her cheeks. Wrinkles were deeply chiseled in her face, especially her forehead. I wondered how many stories were hidden in those creases. She wiped her tears away with her bony hands and began to share her life story with me.

"I was born in Hor Village. I had nine brothers and sisters. We lived happily with my parents," she began in a trembling voice. Tears welled anew as she recalled the past. I wasn't sure if her tears were from happiness or sadness, but I was convinced that she felt OK mentioning her dead parents.

She started again, "When I was twenty, my sisters and brothers married and left home one by one, leaving only me and my younger brother at home with our parents." She stopped and gazed at me, and said, "Just like me, when you come of age, you must marry and move to another village."

I started to think. Local people typically believe girls must marry, leave their family and their aging parents, and stay in their husband's home, even if they object.

When she saw I had fallen silent, she stroked my hair and said, "Child, don't worry. When I reached twenty, it was time to marry. One day, after I finished working in the fields, my parents informed me that I had been promised to a family in another village. I felt overwhelmed. I didn't even know the man I would live with for the rest of my life. I really..." she stopped, seemingly hurt by this memory, and then continued. "I had to agree. I didn't want to disobey my parents." She quickened her speech, as if to avoid that part and said, "I just went there, just..." but she didn't finish her sentence. I also didn't ask her to continue.

We restarted the conversation a few minutes later. Actually, I wanted to ask her to continue immediately, but I couldn't because I felt uncomfortable making more requests. I just looked around, pretending to take interest in things happening nearby.

Realizing that I was waiting for her to continue, she scratched her head a little, shifted her hat, and said "Oh!" but then forgot where she had finished. She smiled at me shyly and asked, "Where were we?"

I answered, "You had decided to go..." but before I could



finish, she struck her forehead with her fist and said, "Oh, look at me. What a stupid old woman! That day was sunny and auspicious. Everybody got up early. My elder sister braided my hair, and I put on my best Tibetan robe and a coral necklace. I was surrounded by my relatives as I went to the groom's home..." She continued, describing her wedding as briefly as possible. Then, when she finished, I thought she would continue to talk; instead, she fell silent.

As I looked at her expression, I got a strange feeling that I shouldn't ask what was next. I just stared at her, silently observing her face.

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The sun seemed to be in a bad mood that day, sometimes releasing all its sunshine to the earth, but sometimes hiding behind the clouds for long stretches of time. Now it began falling behind the mountains. Such moody weather caused children to sing, asking for the sun to appear again. Slowly, my memory pulled me back into my childhood.

When I was a young girl, I often herded goats with my younger sister in winter. We collected dung and put it in the baskets we carried. Sometimes we put kids in them to carry home, too. The winter weather was capricious with sunny and then sometimes overcast, like today. When we were very cold, we sang together and pleaded with the sun to appear again.

<sup>1</sup> ཇམ་མཁོ་མ་ཤར་ཤར།

<sup>2</sup> ཤར་གྱི་སུ་མོ་གང་ཅ།

<sup>3</sup> རྒྱལ་མ་རྒྱུ་ལོ་ལྟ་ཏུ་འཇུག་ཅ།

<sup>4</sup> ལག་གི་རྩ་མོ་ཐང་ལ་ལྷུང་ཅ།

<sup>5</sup> ཇམ་མཁོ་མ་ཤར་ཤར།



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<sup>1</sup>A ma nyi ma shar  
<sup>2</sup>Shar gyi bu mo grang tha  
<sup>3</sup>Nags rdza'i 'og tu 'dzul tha  
<sup>4</sup>Lag gi ja ne thang la lhung tha  
<sup>5</sup>A ma nyi ma shar shar

<sup>1</sup>Shine, shine mother sun.  
<sup>2</sup>All the girls are frozen.  
<sup>3</sup>They've run into the forest.  
<sup>4</sup>Their bowls have fallen from their hands.  
<sup>5</sup>Shine, shine mother sun.

When we finished singing, we looked at the sky together, hoping the sun would reappear.

While I was swimming deeply in this childhood memory, Gang skyid called to me. I stopped reminiscing, and blurted "Oh!"

"What are you thinking about? The sun has begun to set and it's time to go home, but I think we have a little more time to talk before the others leave," she said.

I knew she was worried about her chores at home. I felt guilty and said, "I'm sorry that I disturbed you. Would you like to continue your story tomorrow?" sure that she would agree, but instead she began to talk.

"He and I became a couple," she said, not mentioning her husband's name. I did not ask his name, for it is forbidden to mention a deceased person's name. I won't write his name here, out of respect for her and her husband.

She continued, "We had two girls and a boy after we married. Seven years after our marriage, we wanted to build a new house and move out of his parents' home. And ..." she stopped, trembling. "We went to get lumber from an old house. While we were inside, the roof suddenly collapsed. I was instantly covered by debris. I had no idea what was happening. I heard my husband calling me..." She stopped again, choking back tears. "He was calling my name," she went on.

"Are you OK?" he asked quietly.

"I answered quickly, 'Yes, I'm fine,' and after freeing myself,



pulled the timbers off his back.

"Are you OK?" I asked worriedly.

"He didn't answer. That silence frightened me and nearly stopped my heart from beating. Something was wrong. My body began to go numb and cold blood flowed up my spine, making me shudder. I quickly finished moving away the timbers that covered him, and I saw him. He wasn't moving. I used all my strength to shake him, crying out his name. It didn't work. He was gone. My head began swimming. Suddenly, everything went black. I felt I was falling, falling without hitting the ground. And then I don't remember anything.

"I don't know how long I lay there, but eventually people woke me. He was gone."

She bit her lip, trying to mask her pain. Finally, she couldn't help herself, covered her mouth with her bony hand, and sobbed.

I wondered, "What would I have done had I been there?"

"Oh, my fate was so terrible," she went on, "But, one thing I couldn't accept was..." she stopped, looked straight at me, her eyes brimming with tears, and said in a strong voice, "His parents accused me of killing him and drove me out of the home."

I was shocked, wondering how they could possibly do that, but I only murmured, "Didn't they know it was an accident?"

She nodded and said, "They had lost their child. It was a calamity for them, but... did they ever think of me? I was suffering like them. I had lost my husband, but... they said..."

The sun had already set and the sky had darkened. Suddenly, a strong wind whirled dust and dry leaves around us. I realized we were both wiping our eyes. Was that because we had dust in our eyes or sadness in our hearts?

"It's time to go home, we can talk tomorrow," I said quickly, disrupting her train of thought.

"Yes, that's right. I must go," she said and stood up, shaking the dust out of her old robe, which made me cough. I sat quietly without saying goodbye as she left. I stared at her back as it disappeared into the distance.

"How bent her shoulders are," I thought, and then went home.



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I chatted with my mother that evening. I told her what I had heard that day. "I can't imagine why they treated her like that," I said.

Mother nodded and told me the story of a woman from Skya rgya, the village where she had been born and raised:

This woman married and moved to another village. Her husband's family treated her terribly. She didn't want to stay there and tried to divorce her husband, but his family wouldn't agree. At a loss, she started to walk with a stoop, pretending to be disabled and stayed inside the home all the time. Even though she had made herself useless to her husband's family, they wouldn't grant her a divorce for three years. By that time, everybody thought she really was disabled.

The day after the divorce, her father joked, "Child, if you can straighten your back, it's time to show us." She then stood up straight and tall, which astounded everyone. Later, she said that if she had stayed stooped over like that for two more months, she really would have become a hunchback.

After Mother finished, she said, "A girl is just like a slave in her husband's home when she marries and moves in."

At that time, I wondered if I should praise such women or... I really didn't know.

Women are sensible and strong. We hide suffering in our hearts, and never boast or show our feelings in public. That's the difference between boys and girls. We don't need to belittle ourselves for being born girls. Although society gives up on us, we can live simply and independently. These thoughts ran through my head that night before I slept.

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The next day was sunny. The blue cloudless sky was like a mirror showing its radiant color to the earth. The lonely sun hung in the air without its best friends, the clouds. Mischievous children played in the dusty lanes. Some children were comparing the clothes their family had bought them for New Year, while others were counting how many candies they had been given. The fields around the village



seemed to be waiting for spring. I was also waiting, waiting to hear more of the old woman's story.

I went to her two-story home. The first floor was made of stone and the second floor of wood. It was a wonderful house. Her grandson and granddaughters were playing in front of the gate. When they saw me, they shouted to their grandmother, informing her a guest was coming.

Gang skyid came rushing out to greet me. She was relaxed and sighed when she saw me. "You startled me! I haven't prepared the house very well. Please come inside," she said, gently pushing me into a room. It was clean, but she hadn't finished sweeping. She told me that her daughter-in-law had gone to her mother's home and hadn't returned. Her son had gone to visit a relative in another village and also hadn't come back.

She was thus alone at home with her grandchildren. She began talking as she finished her housework. "My husband's family accused me of killing him and kicked me out. I had no place to go except my natal village. After returning with my three children, we lived with my brothers and sisters, who had their own families, because by then my parents had already died. Their living conditions were poor, and it was hard for them to feed more mouths. I knew I couldn't stay long and I also didn't want to bother them anymore, although they insisted we stay in their home."

"We Tibetans customarily call widows bad names and denigrate them. I knew it would be hard for me to remarry. At the same time, I knew if I didn't remarry, people would also gossip about me. I thought I could take care of the children without a man," she went on.

"I prepared to build a house near the village. I climbed the mountain to cut timber for the house. Although it was a man's job, I did it all myself," she said proudly. "Even though it was a small house, we lived there. At that time, cultivating fields was also a challenge for me, since my boy was too young to help. Cultivating fields is usually a man's job, but I did it."

She suddenly stopped, turned, and rushed outside. Before I knew what was happening, she was drawing a heavy bucket of water



from their well. I put down my notebook quickly and went over to her.

"Please rest, I'll do it for you," I said.

"No, no. It's hard for you, but I can do it easily," she said, pushing me away and pouring water into a tall vat. I knew it was hard work, especially for an old woman, but I didn't insist and stayed where I was. We went inside, sat down, and she continued her story.

"I was very happy living with my children, rather than living in my husband's home, although life was hard," she said, placing a big, red apple in my hands, and gesturing for me to eat. She was so generous. I wondered how she had overcome the difficulties she faced with everyone in the village scorning her.

"How had she fed her children by herself?" I wondered, biting into the apple.

She smiled and said, "My children married and left, one by one. Finally, the youngest one was left with me. When I saw their happy marriages, I felt content and relaxed. Then after a few years, I moved near the Yellow River before the other villagers moved here. I built a house very easily because I didn't need to pay for the land," she said with a satisfied look on her face.

When I heard that I felt very confused. "Why?" I asked.

"Because no one cared about the land then, especially the government," she said.

I nodded slightly and thought she was very smart.

She continued, "In the past, when Hor Village was still on the mountain, we also had fields here, near the Yellow River. In around 2000, most villages moved near the Yellow River, but I got here first and got the best place for free. I did construction work with my son to earn money, and gradually my family became rich. Later, my son married. He has five children and they all attend school. One is even in university. Then, we moved to Cuogankou, a huge, new village that was settled in around 2005. We built a house there and lived happily.

"There are seven hamlets in Cuogankou. At that time, the government gave fifteen Hor families places to move here. So, I got the chance to move. Now, I don't need to worry about anything. I was actually set free after I left my husband's home. Really, I feel free,"



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she said joyfully.

I felt relaxed and inspired, but I was confused as to why I had such feelings. Then, she began cooking lunch and asked me to eat with her family, but I didn't stay. I was eager to go write up her story, which I had jotted down as she talked. The sun was already high in the sky. The wind that blew on my face and through my hair was gentle, like a spring breeze. Everything was energized. The trees and the grass were greener than before. Sometimes, what seems like a tragedy can be a watershed in our lives and the beginning of something wonderful. A source of sadness can become a source of strength, and a loss can become an opportunity. I had new courage to face my own future.




WHO IS TO BLAME?<sup>1</sup>

Klu rgyal 'bum ལུ་རྒྱལ་འུམ་

I was born in a rural village of Dpa' lung (Hualong) Hui Autonomous County, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. I graduated from Mtsho sngon Normal University in 2011 with a BA in English.

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he summer afternoon sun beat down so harshly that everyone underneath felt they were being boiled in a pot. That the sun's heat was destroying the annual crops was a universal complaint, though everyone knew muttering was futile. Only when clouds appeared would anything change. In time, everyone went about their business and complained about the heat less.

I was watching my favorite TV show at home one sweltering afternoon amid this terrible heat. I felt relaxed and undisturbed. Just after eating one of my younger brother's snacks, I heard a wild cry from outside. Terror rose from deep in my heart. I had never before heard such an awful cry. I had heard babies crying for their mothers and children sobbing because they had been beaten, but never anything like this. Paralyzed by fear, my heart pounded. My breathing seemed to have stopped. I listened, waiting for something more. Nothing happened. After a bit, I regained my composure, but the thought that something horrible had happened was stuck in my mind. I stood slowly.

The cry came again and my fear resumed with new intensity. I climbed up the ladder leading to the roof of our house to see what was going on. I saw many people surrounding someone who was crying. Too far away to see clearly, especially given my bad eyesight, I climbed down from the roof and ran to the crowd.

A man lay on the ground, his body covered in blood. He had stopped breathing and was as white as a clean bed sheet. His face radiated a sense of intense suffering.

<sup>1</sup> Klu rgyal 'bum. 2012. Who is to Blame? *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 21:397-408.



He had been stabbed in the gut with a knife. He was beyond saving - not even the Buddha could have helped him. A woman held him. It was her wild lamentations that I had heard. She cried as though her life had ended, ignoring those consoling her. The dead man was her lover. Her eyes communicated her awful grief; that even though her parents and friends were still alive, she felt her life was now meaningless. Her lover had died, and she did not want to continue alone.

I heard people murmuring that she was crazy. "What a terrible fate those two had," others murmured.

There was a history between the couple that the entire village was privy to. Even children knew it all. Dpal ldan and Sgrol ma had loved each other for eight years.

Dpal ldan was twenty-six when he died. Sgrol ma was a year younger. Even though most villagers their age were married with two or three children, they had never married because of the feud between their families that had begun when they were children. The two lovers were fully aware of this conflict but dared love each other anyway.

The two families had initially clashed over irrigation water. Such issues of the dispute were common and villagers thought the two families' relationship would soon recover.

At that time, Dpal ldan and Sgrol ma were studying in senior middle school. They knew each other because they were from the same village and were classmates, but they did not know each other very well. Dpal ldan was a gifted writer, sang popular songs well, and was good-looking and intelligent. Teachers complimented him and his classmates admired him. The school brimmed with gossip about who liked him and who despised him. Girls were as excited to talk to him as they would have been to chat with a Hollywood superstar.

Sgrol ma, on the other hand, was academically in the middle of her class. Teachers and classmates treated her well. She was outgoing, humorous, and easy to get along with. Girls envied her beauty, which made her the focus of many boys' fantasies. To other girls, she was an obstacle to their finding a boyfriend. Dpal ldan and Sgrol ma shared being kind to everyone and were never arrogant.



When the conflict between their families began, Dpal ldan and Sgrol ma were in school and ignorant of village goings-on. Within two days, however, news of a conflict reached Dpal ldan.

"Hey! Dpal ldan! I heard your family was fighting Sgrol ma's family yesterday," a classmate said confidentially in their classroom after afternoon classes.

"What? Fighting about what?" asked Dpal ldan, not believing their families would quarrel. He thought there must be some misunderstanding as his mind raced through the possibilities.

"They argued about irrigation water," said his classmate.

"Oh, maybe it's true," Dpal ldan replied in a strained voice. Struggling over water is common as villagers take turns irrigating their fields both day and night in winter. Dpal ldan worried that if a fight came, his relatives might be physically hurt because Sgrol ma had three elder brothers and each was strong enough to fight his father. Apart from his father, Dpal ldan was the only man in his family. They had no relatives in the village and would be essentially helpless if conflict came. After a while, he ran to a telephone kiosk outside the school and called his parents to ensure everything was fine.

"Hello, it's Dpal ldan," he said

"How are you?" his sister answered.

"I'm great. Is everything there OK?" Dpal ldan asked.

"Father was hurt in a fight yesterday," his sister sobbed.

Dpal ldan suddenly understood what must have happened the day before, and a flame of anger rose inside him. He could not breathe normally.

His sister went on to describe how Sgrol ma's father and three brothers had ganged up on his father. Fortunately, villagers had intervened - if they had not, his father might be dead. Dpal ldan's mother was caring for his father at home. As he listened, Dpal ldan decided that, as the only other man in his family, he must avenge the injustice done to his father. However, he realized it was impossible for him to fight four big men unless he had a gun or could study black



magic like Milarepa.<sup>1</sup> Since both were unattainable, there was nothing to do but endure his shame and anger.

The suffering had only begun. A few days later, Dpal ldan's mother could no longer endure the humiliation from her husband's beating by four men in front of all the villagers in broad daylight and consulted her brother, an official in the county seat. She told him everything and begged for his help.

Sgrol ma's family had been unaware that Dpal ldan's uncle was a powerful official and, while they were still savoring their victory, a clerk came to their home and ordered them to appear in court in a month. The four heroes then knew they were in trouble, but it was too late to avoid a court appearance.

"Father, what should we do next month in court?" asked the second oldest son, Blo bzang, fear on his face.

His father didn't answer, because he had fallen deep into thought. He finally managed, "I'm sure they will fine us, and ..."

"Then what will happen, Father? Tell us," his sons asked nervously. They were afraid of the police and of prison because they had heard that other prisoners beat you and that you suffered terribly.

"I'm not sure if they will imprison us," said their father, but he knew, given Dpal ldan's powerful uncle, they stood a good chance of being jailed.

"Father, is there a way to avoid this?" the eldest son, Rin chen, asked, his voice now softer than a girl's, though he often raised his voice in arguments with villagers.

"No, there's no way, unless we beg that family to forgive us," replied the father.

"What? It's impossible to beg that monster! I'd rather go to prison!" said Blo bzang angrily.

"Yes, I agree," the youngest son, Nyi ma, interjected.

"Shut up! I know it's shameful, but it's the only chance we have. We've got to try!" shouted their father. He knew the villagers

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<sup>1</sup> Milarepa (1040-1123) was a well-known Tibetan yogi who achieved enlightenment in one lifetime. He was extremely thin because he ate very little during long periods of meditation.



would denigrate his family if they asked their enemy for forgiveness, but maybe it was the only solution.

After talking it over further, they eventually decided to apologize to Dpal ldan's family. Two days later, Sgrol ma's father took a bag with two bottles of liquor, some cigarettes, and a white silk *kha btags* in his right hand. In his left hand, he held a sheep's hindquarters in a big, black plastic bag. But before he reached the door of Dpal ldan's house, he was accosted by a notorious village gossip.

"Hey! What are you doing out so early in the morning?" she asked. Seeing what he held in his hands, she had already guessed his purpose.

"You can see for yourself," Sgrol ma's father replied, knowing instantly she would spread the news throughout the village. He knew there was no point in lying and continued on to Dpal ldan's home.

"Are you coming to beat my husband again?" asked Dpal ldan's mother angrily, when he stepped inside their courtyard.

"Please don't joke, Sister. I'm coming to visit your husband," said Sgrol ma's father, using "Sister" in the hope of appeasing her.

"How funny! Did you forget how the four of you beat my husband? And how you pushed away my daughter when she tried to stop you?" she said angrily.

"I'm sorry for all of that. I've come today to sincerely apologize for the wrong we did your family," he said in shame.

Dpal ldan's mother held a broom as she stood in the courtyard, and put herself between Sgrol ma's father and the door to the house. "What? You bastard! Shameless wretch! Rubbish! ..." she scolded endlessly.

He didn't know what to do and stood dumbly, holding his gifts.

"Anyway, I know I was wrong, so I brought these things for your husband," he said, holding out what he had brought.

She pushed his hands away and shouted, "We aren't starving! Get out of here! Now!"

Her husband, lying in bed inside the home just a few meters away, said not a word.



Sgrol ma's father knew his mission was futile and felt even more humiliated because he had been scolded by a woman. He silently swore to return the insult someday. He angrily returned home and reported to his sons what he had suffered from Dpal ldan's mother.

The three sons listened without suggestions. There was nothing to do but await the court's judgment.

When they first heard what was happening in their village, Sgrol ma and Dpal ldan regarded each other as enemies. Privately, however, neither wanted their families' troubles to control their school life and determine their personal relationship.

One afternoon Dpal ldan decided to talk to Sgrol ma. "Sgrol ma, do you have free time now?" he asked after classes were over one afternoon, unsure if Sgrol ma would agree to talk.

"Yeah, for what?" she said nervously. She knew Dpal ldan was not the sort of person who would threaten someone, but she still hesitated.

"I just want to talk about what's going on between our families. Don't worry, I'll only talk," Dpal ldan said.

Sgrol ma blushed when she heard him say that. Although she had never said anything, she was as infatuated with Dpal ldan as were all the other girls.

"OK, no problem," Sgrol ma said.

"We don't have to be enemies because of our families, do we?" said Dpal ldan.

"No, of course not!" agreed Sgrol ma.

"Great! In that case, we have something more to talk about," said Dpal ldan with a smile.

"What? I don't understand..." queried Sgrol ma.

"I think we should counsel our families to stop fighting," suggested Dpal ldan.

"I see. I tried to counsel my father, but your family accused him. My father and brothers must go to court in a few days," explained Sgrol ma, not knowing how she could help.

"Yes, I know. I also tried to stop my parents, but they were very angry and wouldn't listen," said Dpal ldan.



He had called his parents that morning. His father had angrily said, "I'm wondering if you are my real son?" Dpal ldan now doubted his father would ever listen to him again.

Dpal ldan and Sgrol ma talked about their families and their school lives for some time. Both felt better. Sgrol ma had always liked Dpal ldan and her attitude toward him only improved as they chatted.

Fifteen days after the conflict, the two families met in court. The judge ordered Sgrol ma's family to pay a fine, and also put the three sons and their father in prison for forty-five days. The two families then became irreconcilable enemies.

When their time in prison was over, Sgrol ma's father and brothers returned home. They said they had not suffered much in prison because they had always stuck together. However, their enmity toward Dpal ldan's family had increased. They never talked to nor greeted Dpal ldan's family members in the village, and they did not conceal the extent of their hatred. Villagers tried to pacify them, but all peacemaking efforts failed because of their stubbornness. Though they were enemies, at least the two families did not come to physical blows.

Time passed like the wind. Sgrol ma and Dpal ldan entered their final year of senior middle school. If they passed the university entrance exam they would enter college. Dpal ldan was now nineteen and fascinated everyone even more than before. He was busy all year preparing for his college entrance examination and hoped to enter a good college. Sgrol ma was also a good student and her reputation as a beauty had spread far and wide.

Since their first talk, they had been on friendly terms and never blamed each other for their families' problems. Sgrol ma thought Dpal ldan was thoughtful and kind, and gradually fell in love with him, keeping her feelings a secret until their last year in senior middle school. She wanted to tell him of her love but, for what seemed like an eternity, she lacked courage. One evening at a school dance, she decided it was time to act. She called Dpal ldan after the dance finished, not knowing where such courage came from. "Maybe I love him too much," she thought.

When they met, she touched Dpal ldan's back lightly



commenting, "You danced very well tonight."

"Really? Thanks, Sgrol ma. So, did you," he said, smiling.

"May we have a talk?" asked Sgrol ma. She felt that this sentence was almost impossible to say. She had no idea what to do next and was nervous about expressing her feelings.

"Sure, why not? You're not going to eat me, are you?" said Dpal ldan.

"No! Just follow me," Sgrol ma said and walked to the sports ground. The sky was filled with stars. Everything was beautiful. The mountains were like a big picture under the night sky and the moonlit sports ground where couples were romantically strolling seemed to belong only to them. A cool breeze blew, giving them respite from the hot summer temperatures.

"Hey, it's time for you to say something," said Dpal ldan. She did not know how to tell him, except to come right out and say it. For a girl it was embarrassing, but her friends said that nowadays such untraditional things were common.

"I... I want... you... to be... my boyfriend," she said, taking a long time and blushing, shocked by her own words. Everything became deathly still as if the whole world was deep asleep.

Dpal ldan liked Sgrol ma and had not been brave enough to tell her. Now everything was like a dream! For a long time, he did not break the silence, but finally managed, "Hey Sgrol ma, today is not April Fools' Day. Don't joke with me, OK?"

"Oh... I know today isn't April Fools' Day. I'm serious," Sgrol ma said.

He knew she was in love with him, and he realized how lucky he was. They confided their feelings and, with a laugh, became lovers that night. They did not tell their families. As time passed, they helped each other in school and prepared together for the college entrance examination. They were both excited, believing that they had a good chance of passing.

Unluckily, Sgrol ma's score was low, but Dpal ldan was accepted into a good college. Sgrol ma wanted to take the examination a year later, but her illiterate father thought she would be unable to pass and ordered her to return home.



Dpal ldan went to a college far from the village and from Sgrol ma, but their love kept them close. They secretly called each other, and sometimes exchanged letters. When Dpal ldan returned home during holidays, they went on secret dates. This continued for four years until Dpal ldan graduated. During his college time, many girls asked him to be their boyfriend, but he ignored them. While at school, he became increasingly sophisticated. Meanwhile, several families sent marriage proposals to Sgrol ma, who rejected them all.

Her father said, "I don't know what the Hell you're thinking! Who is it that you think you're going to marry?"

Sgrol ma's only reply was a smile.

After Dpal ldan returned home, he found a high-paying job in the county town. He thought it was time to ask Sgrol ma's parents to allow Sgrol ma and him to marry. He worried they would disagree and also might cause trouble because the conflict between the two families had never been resolved. Sgrol ma and Dpal ldan still met secretly when he returned to the village on the weekends, but no secret can be kept forever, and their families eventually learned about their relationship.

"Son, do you really like Sgrol ma or are you just playing?" said Dpal ldan's father, hoping the relationship was a passing fling, not understanding that they had been in love for eight long years.

"Father, I swear my relationship with Sgrol ma is real. I want her to be my wife," said Dpal ldan.

"Son, are you crazy? We are enemies! How could you?" cried his mother.

"Please don't think that way, Mother. That was several years ago. Let's all move on!" Dpal ldan said.

"My poor little son, do you think Sgrol ma's father will agree?" asked Dpal ldan's mother.

"I'm not sure. I hope he will," Dpal ldan said, unconcerned about the consequences, and sent someone to ask Sgrol ma's family for her hand in marriage.

Sgrol ma's father was furious when he heard this. He could not understand how his own daughter could love his enemy's son. He thought she would be treated as an enemy by Dpal ldan's family. As



an official with a stable job and a good salary, Dpal ldan could choose anyone he wanted to, but somehow, he had chosen Sgrol ma!

Sgrol ma's father refused Dpal ldan's proposal and warned Dpal ldan never to contact Sgrol ma again.

Dpal ldan could not help but disobey and the two lovers continued seeing each other. Even though their families hated each other and disagreed with their marriage, the couple led a happy clandestine life, both believing that their families would eventually agree to the marriage.

They were wrong. The marriage never happened. Life is often short and unpredictable. Bad luck crept up on the couple slowly and quietly. They were deeply in love and blissfully ignorant.

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The summer afternoon sun beat down so harshly that everyone underneath felt they were being boiled in a pot. That the sun's heat was destroying the annual crops was a universal complaint, though all knew it was futile to mutter. Only when clouds appeared would anything change. In time, everyone went about their business and complained about the heat less.

Sgrol ma's brothers, Rin chen and Blo bzang, were drinking beer with some men near the corner of a small store. One pointed into the distance and said, "Who the Hell are those two?" The couple wasn't far away. They quickly realized it was Dpal ldan and Sgrol ma.

"Hey Rin chen, is your sister going to marry that guy?" said a man who had proposed to Sgrol ma and was now jealous that she was with Dpal ldan.

"Impossible! I'm that girl's eldest brother. Our family and that guy's family are enemies," Rin chen said, anger welling up inside as he recalled the conflict between their families, how he and his brothers had been humiliated, and how the conflict had remained unresolved, casting a shadow over their lives. In particular, his mind returned to a terrible day in prison, when a group of prisoners had ordered them to wash their boss's feet. Having refused, Sgrol ma's brothers and father were beaten, forced to wash the boss's feet, and then drink the dirty water.

Tibetans consider feet to be the dirtiest part of the human



body and to drink such water is the most humiliating thing imaginable. They buried this humiliation deep in their hearts and never told anybody. Now, seeing his own sister with his enemy's son, all of Rin chen's pain and humiliation surfaced, coursing through him like an electric shock. He stood up and ran at the couple, jerking his dagger from his belt.

Sgrol ma and Dpal ldan did not even notice him coming. By the time Dpal ldan felt the knife in his gut, it was too late.

Rin chen took Dpal ldan from Sgrol ma without a word. He plunged his dagger into Dpal ldan's belly again and again and again.

Sgrol ma was stunned. When she saw blood spurting from Dpal ldan's body, she revived and roared like a dragon, terrifying all who heard.

Rin chen fled.

We came when we heard this cry, but there was nothing we could do. Sgrol ma and Dpal ldan's parents arrived soon after me. Dpal ldan's mother saw her son lying on the ground, his body bathed in blood. She snatched him from Sgrol ma's arms and screamed in agony.

Dpal ldan's father stood by his wife. He did not cry. It was not that he did not want to; it was just that he was deep in thought. His heart was bleeding.

Sgrol ma's parents worried about Rin chen. They knew he would be executed. That was the law, and there was no escape.

Dpal ldan's parents lost their only son because of an inconsequential quarrel over water, and Sgrol ma lost her future husband. Soon she would lose her eldest brother. Because of a simple quarrel, two families lost sons and gained nothing but permanent anguish and regret.

A month after Dpal ldan's death, Rin chen was arrested and sentenced to death for murder. He was trembling when the sentence was handed down. His family did not come to hear the judgment.

Dpal ldan's parents have not stopped grieving. The wrinkles on their faces deepen.

Sgrol ma went to a nunnery to spend the rest of her life.

Now, looking back on things, exactly who was to blame?



YOUNG LOVE<sup>1</sup>

Bkra shis rab brtan བཀྲ་ཤིས་རཐ་བརྟན།

I am a graduate of Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Nationalities University and teach English at 'Bri stod (Zhiduo) Nationalities Middle School.

...

**Y**ou come along a dirt path that runs by a row of adobe houses, each with a small yard. The houses and yards are made of packed earth mixed with yak dung. They are so dilapidated you worry a puff of wind will send them toppling over on the dusty earth from which they have come. Various paths meander in different directions to each family's courtyard gate. White smoke curls up from chimneys, turning the air foggy on sunny mornings and filling the air with a distinctive odor. Some people serenely circumambulate a pile of stones carved with the Six Sacred Syllables<sup>2</sup> and other Buddhist scriptures, surrounded by prayer flags of four colors representing the Four Elements.<sup>3</sup>

An old lady sits by the path, holding a string of prayer beads in one hand and turning a prayer wheel with the other. Her dark brown face is thoroughly lined, each wrinkle representing an episode from her life. The village is surrounded by sloping hills, decorated with colorful flowers and various alpine plants, stretching out in every direction. Clusters of yaks graze in valleys. A calf runs on the pasture in a circle and then races to its mother, its tail straight in the air. The occasional neighing of horses sounds in the valleys as prayer flags flap in the wind behind a line of adobe rooms.

Father Nor bu sat on a worn-out carpet under the eaves, as usual, sewing white fabric into a tent at the request of another family. It was a bright sunny day with skies that glimmered as blue as

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rab brten. 2012. Young Love. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 21:409-419.

<sup>2</sup> *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM* = a common six syllable mantra associated with Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

<sup>3</sup> Earth, water, fire, and wind.



turquoise. A cup of milk tea sat in front of Nor bu, which he had ignored since Mother Sgrol ma placed it there.

Nor bu was dressed in a modern-style coat that he typically wore at home, and also had on a pair of leather shoes, locally called "army shoes." Father Nor bu was forty-three, three years older than his wife.

Mother Sgrol ma wore a Tibetan robe made of artificial lambskin. Most pastoralists no longer kept sheep and the price of real lambskin was so high many Tibetans couldn't afford to buy it. She wore a pair of gold earrings which had dulled over the years. A round metal amulet decorated with fake turquoise hung on a string around her neck.

Three adobe rooms were built in a line. A cupboard with doors decorated with the Eight Auspicious Symbols<sup>1</sup> stood at the back of the kitchen. A large Chinese metal stove with Tibetan vase patterns stood in the center of the room. An inlaid gold dragon wrapped around a wood pillar behind the stove. A yellow *kha btags*<sup>2</sup> was tied to the neck of the pillar. The shrine was a small room featuring a wooden altar where images of a local Dge lugs monastery *bla ma* and a protector deity were displayed. Sgrol ma lit a butter lamp there every morning. There were seven water offering bowls filled with ice. Sgrol ma discarded the ice and filled them with fresh water each morning.

The wind carried the strong odor of something burning. You could hear the sound of children playing on their way home. Other children chased a tractor and climbed into the trailer without the driver's knowledge.

"Prepare lunch quickly. The children will be home soon," said Nor bu in his usual gentle tone.

Sgrol ma didn't reply for a moment, squinted into the distance, and said, "That villain must have troubled them on the way home again. I'll go to his home and talk to his parents otherwise, he

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<sup>1</sup> The Eight Auspicious Symbols consist of the parasol, a pair of gold fish, a treasure vase, a lotus, a white conch shell, a victory banner, an endless knot, and the gold wheel of the dharma.

<sup>2</sup> A strip of silk given to a person, deity, or object as a sign of respect.



won't stop."

"Hush! Don't create trouble. I'm too stressed for such trivialities! I can't bear to have more trouble," Nor bu said.

Mtsho mo, the seventy-five-year-old grandmother, wore a robe that was reasonably new but never looked clean, though Sgrol ma washed it twice a week. Mtsho mo sat on a small stool, chanting scriptures, holding her worn prayer beads in her right hand. She loved her grandchildren dearly, and frequently bought candies for her grandsons and little ornaments for her granddaughter. She grew increasingly anxious because the children hadn't returned.

"They should have returned by now. School children are naughtier these days," Grandmother said impatiently.

"I'm starving!" shouted Tshe ring suddenly. His sister, Lha mo and he parked their bicycles in the corner of the yard where five-year-old Bkra shis, the youngest son, was playing like a cat, trying to catch a soccer ball. The two older children were middle school students in the county town, twelve kilometers from the township settlement. They rode bicycles to and from school.

Their parents were pastoralists who owned a few yaks that provided dairy products. Villagers earned much of their annual cash income in spring from collecting and selling caterpillar fungus, a medicinal herb. The family collected caterpillar fungus every year, as did most families. Local schools freed students to collect it during their summer holiday. Caterpillar fungus grew in the valleys and on the hills near the settlement. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo stayed at home, taken care of by Nor bu or Sgrol ma, while the other parent went to collect caterpillar fungus with the two older children. Nor bu also made and sold tents to other families, adding to the family's income.

"Did you prepare lunch? I'm dying of hunger and we must return to school soon. None of the other parents prepare late lunches," demanded Tshe ring.

"Shut up or go to another home for your meals," scolded his mother.

"Be patient, boy. Don't complain just because you are a student," Nor bu said in a voice with equal measures of disapproval and kindness.



"You two mistreat your children. If they leave, I'll follow them," murmured Grandmother, coming to the rescue as usual, when the parents scolded the children.

Sgrol ma put two bowls of noodles on the wood table and Tshe ring brought two pairs of chopsticks from the cupboard.

Tshe ring and Lha mo were in grade three of junior middle school, would graduate in September, and then go to the prefecture seat to continue their studies.

Tshe ring was fifteen years old and had attended school since he was six. He was tall with a crooked nose that resembled his father's. His hair was fashionably wavy with white and gray streaks among the black, the consequence of a vitamin deficiency. He obeyed his father and took care of his attractive sister.

Seventeen-year-old Lha mo was charming and always dressed in neat, clean clothes. Her bright eyes and her attractiveness tempted many schoolboys, and also brought trouble. She had started school when she was seven and hadn't done very well. Nor bu then insisted that she repeat grade one, which explained why she and her brother were in the same grade.

"Mother! Where is my lipstick?" yelled Lha mo.

"Behind the mirror," Sgrol ma replied.

Many boys tried to win Lha mo's heart but she rejected them all. When her classmates told her she was a beauty, she usually replied, "I didn't choose to be a beauty, the gods made me so."

She was forthright in her dealings with every student except Don 'grub, her neighbor's son, a handsome boy of eighteen with long dark hair hanging above his broad shoulders, and a bit taller than Lha mo, which gave her a feeling of security. They were fated to be in the same school and shared the same hobby, photography. In time they walked together in the schoolyard during breaks, filling the air with murmured words of endearment. The progress of their relationship was rapid and surprised observers. They gave much attention to their appearance before meeting on the bank of a stream that flowed like a white silk streamer waving in the breeze. "I'll graduate soon and go with my brother to the prefecture seat for senior middle school. I won't see you then," Lha mo said sadly.



"Yeah, I'll miss you every day," murmured Don 'grub.

Lha mo took an amulet from around her neck, gave it to Don 'grub, and said, "This will protect you."

Don 'grub put it around his neck and pulled Lha mo into his arms. She leaned her head on his shoulder. They remained quietly together for two hours. When it was time to leave, Lha mo looked into his eyes intently, reluctant to part, then whispered, "Separation won't change our love. What matters is our hearts."

"I don't want you to leave. I can't live without you!" Don 'grub exclaimed.

"I must go. Father will scold me if I don't," insisted Lha mo.

"Can we both leave school and go where nobody will bother us?" mused Don 'grub.

"Impossible. How can we live without our parents?" Lha mo said.

The shining stars quivered in darkness. Everything was deadily quiet, except for dogs barking in the distance. The crescent moon was shyly gathering strength amid thousands of shining stars.

Finally, they stood. Don 'grub escorted her to her home, kissed her gently, holding her red cheeks in his palms for a tender moment. Then she walked into the family courtyard. It was nearly two AM when Lha mo crept into her bedroom, but her mother heard.

The next morning, Sgrol ma came to the kitchen and demanded, "Where were you last night? Did you meet that boy? What did you do with him? Don't lie to me!"

"Nothing. I just went to his home and we chatted," replied Lha mo, her head down.

"Nonsense! Your behavior is worse than we imagined!" yelled Sgrol ma.

"Don't talk to your child like that. She'll leave home soon," said Nor bu calmly.

"Don't scold her! She's still young," Grandmother said, patting Lha mo's back to comfort her.

"I want the freedom to deal with my own business. Mother forbids me to do anything," Lha mo sobbed and put her head in her grandmother's arms.



Her mother scolded, "How can she talk about her mother like that? You aren't mature enough to make your own decisions."

During quarrels, Nor bu remained silent, as though he were a guest. After breakfast, he resumed making the tent. When he heard the dogs barking, he said, "The dogs are hungry. Don't forget to feed them."

Sgrol ma continued scolding Lha mo.

"I'll take the child away from home if you hate her so much," warned the grandmother.

"You allow the children to go their own way. Be quiet and behave like a bystander. I have the authority to educate my own child," Sgrol ma retorted.

"Until I die I won't let anyone hurt them!" the grandmother said furiously.

"I'll go see his parents tomorrow!" Sgrol ma said, then took a pot with leftovers and went outside to feed the dogs.

...

"If they love each other passionately, I have nothing to say," Don 'grub's father said. "I know they're too young but, on the other hand, we can't forbid their minds from thinking, though we try to stop their actions."

"I won't let your son contact my daughter," Sgrol ma said.

"We have nothing more to say then," concluded Don 'grub's father quietly. "I don't want to interfere in the children's business if they don't do silly things."

Sgrol ma left her neighbor's home as the red sun burnt the earth, which seemed to vibrate under Sgrol ma's tired eyes. The air stank and she blew her nose to clear her mind. Her slow pace gave an opportunity for her to consider. "They'll leave soon. I won't scold my dear daughter anymore," Sgrol ma muttered. Her tired eyes filled with tears as sadness flooded her heart. She heard a feeble sound, looked into the distance, and saw her children waving and calling to her.

The sky rapidly vanished, conquered by large clusters of dark, ominous clouds that swept in low to the earth, quickly covering what was left of the sun. A big eagle circled Sgrol ma and squawked



horribly. The dark clouds were moving west, mingling with the ends of the earth. The eagle seemed to be sending her a message. She quickened her pace and was soon panting. When she got home and stepped inside, nobody was in the kitchen. She pushed open the bedroom door and saw Nor bu lying on the bed and the three children, who were kneeling by him, sobbing dejectedly. They all looked up at Sgrol ma worriedly.

"What happened?" Sgrol ma asked in puzzlement. "Father fainted from a sudden headache," a sobbing Tshe ring replied.

"Why?" enquired Sgrol ma anxiously.

"Our protector deity lost his temper because of your quarreling," announced the grandmother, sitting in a corner of the room, her hands busy with prayer beads and the prayer wheel.

"What should we do?" Sgrol ma asked with concern.

"Invite monks immediately," the grandmother ordered sternly.

Sgrol ma and Tshe ring invited local monks. Ten days passed and Nor bu improved. As the monks were leaving the home having completed various rituals, the head monk said, "Your protector deity is pacified. Nor bu will be fine. Don't upset the deity again, otherwise, things will be worse."

Nor bu recovered and the two older children were noticeably more mature.

As time drew near for the two children to leave for the distant boarding school, the grandmother and Sgrol ma shed tears of sadness.

Sgrol ma brought a metal plate with some glowing embers from the fire, added a spoonful of barley flour on the fire, and then sprinkled some water from the kettle lid. She put this incense offering outside on a big stone, chanting inaudibly. She prayed for her children while offering incense to the deity.

The grandmother's face flooded with tears and her eyes were red. She finally blurted, "Don't forget to chant every evening, and don't lose your amulets. I'll always pray for you."

Lha mo and Tshe ring kissed their mother and grandmother before leaving for the bus station escorted by Father Nor bu. Sgrol ma



and the grandmother stood at the house courtyard gate, watching the children disappear into the distance. Sgrol ma soon went inside while the grandmother still stood, rubbing her wet eyes, gazing into the distance.

"You two take care of yourselves. The most important thing is health. Education is secondary," emphasized Nor bu at the bus station, as he helped put their luggage atop the bus.

...

Time passed. Tshe ring and Lha mo boarded at the new school and were initially interested in their new surroundings. They were in the same class and both studied hard. Tshe ring felt fine and was never homesick. In contrast, Lha mo felt a bit nostalgic. Though her mother had forbidden her to contact Don 'grub, she missed her mother and sobbed at night, wrapping her head in her quilt.

Lha mo soon regained her exuberant personality and got along well with all the students, especially the boys, who were drawn to her and eager to become more intimate. She was only attracted by Rin chen, who was tall, handsome, had a pale face, and wore fashionable clothes. He attracted many girls. Rin chen was a grade higher than Lha mo and three years older. In the course of time, Lha mo and Rin chen became closer and met in the schoolyard one night when most students were dreaming in their beds. Sitting close together on the stairway that led to their classroom, the universe seemed full of their sweet emotions. A sickle moon and an incalculable number of stars decorated a boundless sky, twinkling in the gentle breeze. Lha mo looked up and saw a star fall. Feeling hurt and frightened, her brain was paralyzed and she couldn't speak for a moment. A bit later, with widened eyes and mouth, she managed to stammer, "Look!"

"What's wrong?" asked Rin chen.

"I don't know," she replied, and then he walked her to her dormitory. Once in bed, she thought about the falling star and couldn't sleep. "It's an omen. Something bad will happen to me," she worried, and then finally slept, only to dream of an old man calling to her. She was awakened by this disturbing dream and didn't sleep well the rest of the night.



Rumors flew about their relationship. Tshe ring heard but concentrated on his studies and, as usual, said nothing. He recalled his father's advice and worked hard. His honesty and diligence attracted many girls, but he ignored them.

Finally, however, Tshe ring felt he had to say something and one evening said to Lha mo, "You should think about our family. We are their hopes and wishes. Don't disappoint them."

"I know what I'm doing. Don't order me!" she replied before storming out of the classroom, slamming the door behind her.

...

Lha mo and Rin chen drew ever closer, spending some nights together in hotels. This relationship continued until Rin chen graduated from senior middle school and went to college. Lha mo still loved him though he called less often as time passed. Lha mo thought he would marry her if their families agreed. She naively clung to the belief that they would have a romantic life together in the end. Rin chen visited her a few times after he graduated from senior middle school and they spent some romantic nights together.

When she and her brother were preparing for the college entrance examination, each student was given a health check. When it was Lha mo's turn, she uneasily and timidly entered the room. She was pregnant! This news swept through the school like wildfire. Her bright future dimmed. She was now eighteen and seemed to have fallen into a deep hole surrounded by darkness. She could see no hope and was enraged that Rin chen never called her after this news. She recalled his gentle words and loving expression when they were together. Everything had changed. The only thing on her mind was anger and helplessness.

When the news reached her family, Nor bu came to school by bus. The stench of the town assaulted him and made him uncomfortable. He heard thunder in his mind, combined with exhaustion and anxiety. He went to meet the school director and other teachers. "Think about her future. She is too young to have a child. She should have an abortion," the school director suggested.

"I have no right to kill an innocent life," Nor bu said.

"We have some responsibility for this situation. We can pay



her to work in the school as an entrance guard," the school director said.

"Thank you, but first I want to take her home. The baby should be born there. I need to discuss this with my family," Nor bu said.

Nor bu and the teachers went to Lha mo's room, pushed open the door and, to their horror, found her hanging from a rope tied to a metal bar in the ceiling. They immediately rescued her.

"Please don't care about me. I'm not worth your concern," coughed Lha mo. "I have no value. I can't live in this world."

"What foolishness!" her father cried.

"We decided to allow you to work in the school as a guard. Take this chance to create a new life for yourself," comforted the school director.

She cried desperately. Her father hugged her to his chest and comforted, "My child, don't cry. We are going home."

...

Lha mo and Nor bu returned home. The family was very upset by this mishap. "I knew this would happen. I told you to stay away from the guys," Sgrol ma said, pointing at Lha mo, sobbing quietly by the stove.

"Who is the child's father?" Nor bu asked Lha mo.

Lha mo said nothing.

"He should be responsible. Tell us whose child it is," Sgrol ma said.

"It happened to me and I don't want other people to know more. I will obey you in everything. It's my fate, and I accept it," Lha mo said.

"Listen to her. She is sad enough," the grandmother said.

"We should at least let his parents know," Nor bu said.

Sgrol ma took Lha mo to the bedroom.



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Over dinner that evening, the family discussed consulting a local *bla ma* for a divination. "Let the child be born first. Then we'll ask the incarnation *bla ma* if she should accept the school job or continue her study," Sgrol ma suggested.

"It is wise to accept the job since it's very hard to find employment, even for college graduates. Since our daughter had this misfortune, I think it is hard for her to concentrate on her studies," Nor bu said.

"We should ask the *bla ma* for advice. It is very important for her life," the grandmother said.

Darkness attacked and the world became quieter, a world in which thousands of stars glimmered in the sky amid the sound of flapping prayer flags and barking dogs. There seemed to be life in the world after all. Falling stars streaked through the sky.

Who will see them fall?



# SILENT AS A WINTER CUCKOO: MY GRANDPARENTS' LOVERS<sup>1</sup>

Pad+ma dbang chen པད་མ་དབང་ཆེན་

When my grandparents were children, parents were gods and their decisions about such issues as marriage and the choice of marriage partners were final. Children had no right to choose a spouse. Many parents found a daughter-in-law with a blood relationship for their son, believing this would ensure better family harmony. Consequently, many Tibetans struggled in sad marriages. Of course, parents hoped their children would have a good, stable life and not all arranged marriages were unhappy.

...

When Grandfather was eighteen he herded sheep on our pastureland every day. At that time, sheep and goats covered an enormous mountain that resembled a member of the Himalayas. Herders stayed together, played, told folktales, and sang folk songs. Some wrestled and others talked about their lovers. In many ways, this daily gathering resembled a celebration of victory in battle.

Grandfather and his lover, Dkon mchog mtsho, herded and had lunch together every day. They went home from the pastureland and soon met again after supper because they loved and needed each other as much as fish need water. They felt that they were the happiest people in the world, and hoped to marry. Everyone understood their intimate relationship and envied their loyalty to each other.

Some other girls were especially jealous because Grandfather was handsome.

In time, Great-grandfather discovered their relationship and resolved to end it. Grandfather was as silent as a winter cuckoo because he was afraid of his father. However, he thought about how to convince his parents, or how to have a life with his lover. After

<sup>1</sup> Pad+ma dbang chen. 2012. Silent as a Winter Cuckoo: My Grandparents' Lovers. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 21:421-426.



some days he decided to elope, so went to where he usually met Dkon mchog mtsho, and luckily found her there. They looked longingly at each other as Dkon mchog mtsho's tears streamed down her red cheeks and seeped into the earth.

Grandfather embraced her tightly and told her what he had planned. After a moment's thought Dkon mchog mtsho agreed.

The next morning, he took some bags and met Dkon mchog mtsho. They walked hand in hand for a long way until a familiar voice suddenly boomed behind them. They turned and saw Great-grandfather. He had pursued them and forced them to return home.

Grandfather's plan thus became like autumn leaves that fall from trees onto the earth.

When they got home, Great-grandfather warned Grandfather, "If you meet Dkon mchog mtsho again, I will disown you, my dear son."

Grandfather did not reply because he knew all their relatives would scold him for opposing his father's decision. It was unthinkable that a son would disobey his father. Such a man was regarded as worthless.

Great-grandfather said, "Next month, we will visit Sangs rgyas mtsho's home."

"Why must you dictate my marriage? I only want to marry Dkon mchog mtsho. Father, please permit me to marry my true love. Don't force me," pleaded Grandfather sadly.

Great-grandfather said, "Please understand that our family is poor. Two years ago, I went to Uncle Rin chen's home and arranged your marriage to Sangs rgyas mtsho. If you marry her, I can work with Rin chen, a well-known and successful businessman. This will greatly improve our poor life. Do you want our family members to starve?"

Speechless, Grandfather nodded in apparent agreement.

Grandfather's torment lasted for a half-month, and then Great-grandfather took a bottle of barley liquor, and two hind quarters of mutton to Grandmother's home. My grandparents met and chatted about their childhood and then Grandfather told her that he had a sweetheart.



Grandmother was happy to hear this and confided, "I also have a lover. We herd together, which allows for frequent contact. My lover and I have shared one quilt and what happens between lovers happened. My father doesn't know. Thank you for telling me about your lover. Continue your relationship with her. Maybe she is still waiting for you. Also, we have a blood relationship that makes our marriage unsuitable."

Grandfather thought for a bit and then murmured, "You're right, but we dare not oppose our parents' decisions. Let's solve these problems. Let's marry according to their arrangements and then I'll escape with my lover when the chance comes. You can return home and marry your lover. We will thus all achieve our hopes."

Grandmother thought for a moment and said, "Your father will kill you if you do this."

At that moment, Grandmother's father appeared and said, "You will marry on the fifteenth day of next month."

My grandparents nodded their heads in reluctant agreement.

After a meal, Great-grandfather very happily said goodbye to Grandmother's family. Grandmother nodded to Grandfather, signaling again that she agreed with his idea.

Grandmother knew that opposing her father was useless, but she cried loudly for two or three days and ate nothing. Then her father said, "If you live, you are his person and if you die, you are his ghost."

When he returned home, Grandfather met Dkon mchog mtsho as soon as he could and told her his idea. She listened, embraced Grandfather, and agreed.

The wedding day came and my grandparents married as planned. Though Dkon mchog mtsho understood why Grandfather had gone through with the marriage, the scene of her lover's marriage made her so sad and angry that she then married the man her father had arranged for her to marry.

Grandfather was devastated that his plan was shattered. He seemed to have lost his true love.

Some days passed. Grandfather gathered his courage and decided to go to Dkon mchog mtsho's husband's home and kidnap his



lover the next morning. When he arrived, he found Dkon mchog mtsho and her husband doing family chores. Grandfather walked over to them, spoke to Dkon mchog mtsho, and grabbed her hand.

Dkon mchog mtsho was at a loss, but she did not resist. Then her husband stepped in, and the two men began fighting. Suddenly, Dkon mchog mtsho's husband took out a dagger and stabbed Grandfather in the gut. Grandfather continued to beat him with his fists. A few minutes later, blood had soaked Grandfather's long robe and he stumbled and fell.

Dkon mchog mtsho's husband squatted nearby, holding his head in his hands. Dkon mchog mtsho wept loudly and embraced Grandfather tightly, her head on his chest. She thought if Grandfather died, she would soon join him in the afterlife. Her husband just stared at them.

Dkon mchog mtsho's father-in-law came, took in everything that had happened with a single glance, and angrily beat his son. He then took Grandfather to a small, distant clinic where, fortunately, he was saved. The gossip about what had happened was nearly as bad as Grandfather's wounds. Grandfather and Grandmother were deeply humiliated.

After three months, my relatives brought Grandfather back home. This was followed by a long period of dispute between the involved families. Finally, expensive items were given to Grandmother's family as an apology. Great-grandfather begged Grandmother's family to accept their apology, and Grandfather promised to never do such things again and swore to be good to Grandmother. Grandmother's family was touched by Grandfather's sincerity. They also realized Grandfather was young and impetuous, so at last the families were reconciled, but only after 2,000 RMB was paid to Dkon mchog mtsho's family after many of her husband's relatives came to Grandfather's home demanding compensation.



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The conflict was solved.

Dkon mchog mtsho decided to never meet Grandfather again because she feared it would lead to more horrible consequences.

Grandfather and Dkon mchog mtsho's love resembled a short-lived rainbow that vanishes in the summer sky.

My grandparents needed a house and prepared the construction materials. There were many things they needed to do.

Meanwhile, Grandmother realized that there was no way for her to escape the marriage her father had arranged and made no effort to contact her lover.

The old adage "Love will come in time" proved true and my grandparents slowly grew to love each other and eventually had a happy life together.




QQ DESTINY<sup>1</sup>

Pad+ma dbang chen པད་མཁའ་ཆེན།

I heard this story when I was a student in Xi'an City. I added to it, using pieces of other stories that I heard, and my imagination.

...

 gentle breeze blew across everyone's face, creating a feeling of pleasure. Sunshine brought the earth to life in the same way a clanging bell jars sleepers awake. Birds flitted in a cloudless blue sky announcing spring's imminent arrival.

It was the second weekend after the start of the new semester. Sunshine beamed through our dorm room window. I took deep breaths of cool air and felt excellent. Everything seemed new and fresh. I went outside to review some materials for class. I reached the school sports ground and found many students reading aloud and studying their lessons, filling the sports ground with noise. I sat on a step and began reading.

A few minutes later, a young man whom I had seen before walked within about ten meters of me. I realized that he was someone I had first met when the term began. I greeted him and we soon began chatting about our winter holidays. He told me this story about a couple.

CHOS DBYANGS AND GU RU

When Chos dbyangs first came to Xi'an to begin her studies, she was gentle and kind with a mind as pure as snow. Everyone liked her. She studied hard during the first semester, listening carefully, and doing what the teachers said. She spent most of her time studying and practiced her Chinese with her Chinese classmates when she was free. She never wasted time. Her school life was fulfilling and many students envied her. In fact, so many compliments bounced around her that she became somewhat self-intoxicated.

<sup>1</sup> Pad+ma dbang chen. 2012. QQ Destiny. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 21:427-434.



Feeling bored one Saturday morning, she considered playing shuttlecock or chatting with someone. Undecided, she instinctively wandered to an internet bar, went inside, logged into her QQ account, noticed a request from someone to join her QQ list, accepted, and started chatting.

"Who are you? Why do you want to be my friend?" Chos dbyangs asked.

"My name is Gu ru. I'm not sure, maybe it's our fate," was the reply.

They each introduced themselves and soon realized that they had grown up in the same general area and were the same age. They thus had much to discuss.

The man was from an agro-pastoral family that had ample cropland and a large number of sheep. His family was poor, however. Finally, he typed, "Please give me your phone number. I have a special feeling about you. I really feel very good when chatting with you."

Chos dbyangs thought about it for a bit, typed her phone number, said goodbye, and happily returned to her dorm room where she shared her conversation with her roommates.

Some days later, Gu ru phoned her. Gradually their relationship became more intimate. In time, they shared the feeling lovers share. Time seemed to flow like a river that never pauses when they chatted, and Chos dbyangs experienced emotions she had never felt before. As the days passed, their love deepened. They chatted every night, and if there was a day when Gu ru didn't phone, Chos dbyangs felt that day was empty and meaningless.

#### A CONSTRUCTION JOB

After three months, Chos dbyangs decided to find a construction job for Gu ru and ask him to come to Xi'an so they could live together. She searched the internet and found what seemed to be a suitable job, called Gu ru, and asked him to come.

Gu ru then announced to his parents that he had found a job in Xi'an with the help of a friend. He said he could earn a lot of



money in a year. He lied, "My friend bought a car from his income last year. I must go there to make money and then buy a car for our family. Science and technology are now so highly developed that we cannot still ride horses and continue to live in such a poor house. Trust me! The God of Wealth has taken me into his embrace."

His family listened carefully, felt what he said was reasonable, and agreed that he could travel to Xi'an.

Gu ru then rushed to the provincial capital, bought the cheapest train ticket available, and was soon on his way to Xi'an.

#### MEETING

Chos dbyangs was overjoyed when she learned Gu ru would soon arrive. Meanwhile, Gu ru was in a dream-like state on the train. He seemed to be the happiest man in the world and everything seemed beautiful. The proverb 'Shit had become gold in his eyes' was very apt. He even imagined he could hear the trees and flowers congratulating him from outside the train windows. He thought about reaching Xi'an thirteen hours later, Chos dbyangs would be waiting for him at the train station, they would walk away from the train station hand in hand...

The train arrived on time. He got off and began searching the strange faces, looking for a familiar QQ face. Finally, they saw each other. Chos dbyangs was wearing fashionable clothes and her permed hair made her even more attractive. Gu ru was dressed in ordinary clothes. A single glance informed that he was a countryside man, yet his handsome features made him stand out.

They quickly drew near each other and embraced tightly. Gu ru felt that he had found a fairy maiden and Chos dbyangs was equally satisfied. Hand in hand, they walked out from the train station while chatting about his trip. When they got near Chos dbyangs's university, they decided to rent a room nearby to avoid their relationship being detected.

A few hours later, they had rented a room for 500 RMB a month and moved in.

A few days passed and then Chos dbyangs took Gu ru to the



construction company that she had earlier contacted about employment. When they arrived, they met a man dressed in an expensive suit working in a large, lavishly decorated office. The two lovers sat while Gu ru began introducing himself. After he had said a few sentences in broken Chinese, the boss realized Gu ru was a minority, and that he had no previous construction work experience. The boss then interrupted him, made an excuse, and said goodbye.

They disappointedly returned to their small room. Chos dbyangs felt very bad that the company had refused to hire him. She felt responsible because she had promised Gu ru a high-paying job in Xi'an.

They had a simple, subdued supper of flat-noodle soup. Gu ru was sad and silent. Chos dbyangs then went to a nearby store and bought ten bottles of beer, which she brought back to their room.

Gu ru looked at Chos dbyangs and said, "I'm useless. I can't even do something as simple as getting a lowly construction job."

Chos dbyangs responded by opening a bottle and drinking some cups of beer with Gu ru. Chos dbyangs said, "Don't worry, my father puts 1,000 RMB on my bank card each month. That's enough for us to eat. Don't blame yourself, and don't blame fate. This is not your fault."

Gu ru felt guilty and ashamed and drank more beer.

Two hours passed.

They were drunk.

They embraced and kissed.

Chos dbyangs put one hand around Gu ru's neck and ran her fingers through his hair with her other hand. They hugged more passionately and then kissed. Chos dbyangs moved over and sat on Gu ru's lap...

#### PREGNANT

Two months passed and Chos dbyangs felt sure she was pregnant. She and Gu ru went to a hospital where a doctor said, "You are a student and you are pregnant. You need 5,000 RMB for an abortion. Life has not been fair to you."



The high fee frightened Gu ru and Chos dbyangs, who did not have 5,000 RMB. They then decided to stay in their room and wait. Day by day, Chos dbyangs's belly got bigger and bigger. Finally, she could no longer attend class.

When the winter holiday approached, she phoned her parents and said, "I cannot join you for the New Year, I must stay in Xi'an and study Chinese."

Her parents reluctantly agreed and missed her terribly.

Several mornings later, a baby entered this world and a more painful life began.

#### WRONG CHOICES

Gu ru decided to take Chos dbyangs and the baby to his home, because they could not continue to live in Xi'an, depending only on Chos dbyangs's stipend. When they got near Gu ru's home, his parents saw three people and almost fainted. Gu ru had earned not a single RMB and had also brought two people home.

After Gu ru described everything that happened, his father beat him mercilessly with a stick. Chos dbyangs stood, silently watching.

Gu ru's father thought for many sleepless nights and then announced one morning, "I will go to Chos dbyangs's home and inform them of what has happened. I hope they will accept that Chos dbyangs has become Gu ru's wife."

Everyone stared at him in disbelief.

Chos dbyangs pleaded, "Please don't. According to local custom, they will call all their relatives, come here in a group, and destroy this house. They might even kill Gu ru. They will surely take all the livestock. Please leave this situation as it is."

Gu ru's father hesitated and said, "You cannot deceive your parents. I will be responsible for whatever happens, even if it costs Gu ru his life."

Chos dbyangs knelt and begged, "I can live without my own family, but this baby cannot live without a father. As long as we don't talk about this, no one will know. Don't create conflict between our families. Nothing good will come of it."



Gu ru's father was touched and decided not to inform her parents. Chos dbyangs stayed in the home. When her parents called on her mobile phone, she said that she was in school and doing very well. Her parents were very proud of having such a diligent daughter, and truly believed she was studying hard in Xi'an. Meanwhile, she lived in Gu ru's home, leading the life of the wife of an agro-pastoralist and hardworking daughter-in-law. She spent the money her parents put in her bank account mostly on the baby, who was fretful, frequently ill, and often taken to local doctors.

Her school in Xi'an expelled her after she stopped attending classes.

Gu ru was always busy on the grassland herding his family's livestock, or in the fields harvesting barley and doing other agricultural work.

All the locals pitied Chos dbyangs and the hard work she had to do for the family as a young wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. This had become her reality, a destiny that she had tried to escape by attending university.

#### GONE

Time passed. Chos dbyangs's parents phoned her and said, "You have now graduated. We are so proud of you!"

Chos dbyangs answered, "Dear parents! I now have my diploma and will soon be home to show you!"

Her parents were very pleased and eagerly awaited her visit. Chos dbyangs then paid 2,000 RMB to have a fake diploma printed and returned home. She wore a happy expression, guiltily showed the diploma to her parents, and said, "I've been accepted into a graduate degree program. I want to continue my study to further develop myself."

Her parents were delighted to hear this, happily consented, and handed over what Chos dbyangs said the school fees were for the first year of graduate study. Chos dbyangs took the money, returned to Gu ru's home, and resumed her life of hard labor.

Some months later, her parents phoned her. Chos dbyangs



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hung up without saying anything, agonizing over her wrong choices and years of deception.

Chos dbyangs, Gu ru, and their baby vanished one morning. Gu ru had decided to leave before Chos dbyangs's family eventually learned of their deception and the terrible consequences that would ensue.

Today, no one, not even their parents, knows where they are.



LONGING FOR SNOW-COVERED PEAKS:  
DEITY POSSESSION IN THE PHILIPPINES<sup>1</sup>

Lhun 'grub ལུན་ཀུར།

I wrote this story based on my experiences in the Philippines and what I imagined.

...

Roach!" Adriano screamed. I turned and saw him running naked out of the bathroom, desperately trying to cover himself with a towel. He ran into the room where Madi, the landlord, and I were watching a local show on TV.

"It won't bite you!" said Madi, standing up, looking annoyed. "I'll take care of this just this once. Next time, do it yourself." He then grabbed a broom from behind the door and went inside the bathroom.

"Why are you always angry?! We pay you 3,000 pesos a month," Adriano responded unhappily, which is how he usually talked to Madi. Quarreling was constant in the boarding house and small issues sometimes grew into fierce conflicts.

Adriano continued, "Madi, I tell you honestly that there's no reason for you to be upset. Unlike your previous boarders, I don't drink and I don't smoke. I even gave you 500 pesos for your daughter's birthday last month."

Adriano sat down next to me. He was barefoot and smelled pleasantly of shampoo.

Nobody said anything. Madi probably hadn't heard him. A moment later Madi came out of the bathroom. As he passed me on his way outside, I saw a flattened cockroach in his left palm. I hadn't expected Madi to unleash his anger on that innocent creature. I was so distressed that I rushed upstairs to my room. Adriano followed, stopped at my bedroom door, and said, "I'm going to move to another house. He's too..." he didn't know what word to use, but I'm sure he

<sup>1</sup> Lhundrom (Lhun 'grub, Tunzhi). 2013. Longing for Snow-covered Peaks: Deity Possession in the Philippines. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 28:225-235.



was searching for a negative one.

A bit later, Madi knocked on my door, opened it, and said, "We're going to hold an exorcism at a neighbor's house. Last night you said you wanted to come. Get ready. We'll leave soon."

"OK, I'll come downstairs immediately," I said.

I got up and opened the window. Warm air rushed into my room. I felt as though I were suffocating. Every time I felt the air burning, which was quite usual where I lived, I recalled what a priceless luxury it was to have snow back home and to be able to enjoy the beauty of different seasons. Such weather and such scenes were entirely different from Manila's scorching heat and days and nights of constant rain. I showed locals pictures of snow-capped mountains whenever I had the chance, knowing that they had probably never seen snow. Sometimes, just looking at pictures of snowcapped mountains made me feel cooler, especially when the air was particularly hot. I thought at times that the heat in Manila was a physical thing that I might be able to destroy or remove. Nothing was enjoyable in such awful weather. Anyway, I was excited about going with Madi to observe a local exorcism.

I put on my clothes, quickly grabbed my camera, and went downstairs. Joe and Madi were already waiting for me.

"You'll be surprised by what you will see today," Madi said as we walked outside the house.

"Please surprise me. I already know how you do divination," I replied.

Even though I made it sound like a joke, I hoped Joe would comment on what I had said so that I could ask him more questions about his practice of divination. Many in the local community, and even from distant cities, came to Joe for divination. What interested me most about his practice was that it was like nothing that I had seen before. How he changed physically during his period of possession made it even more interesting. Oddly, I never felt comfortable asking him questions about his practice, even though I was burning with curiosity.

"So, what is the context here? Why do they want you to perform an exorcism at their home?" I asked, turning to Joe who was



walking on my right side.

"Their baby was crying the whole night and the doctors couldn't find any reason. The child's father thinks the spirit of his long-deceased father is the cause. They want us to drive his spirit away," Joe explained cautiously, regularly turning to me and gesturing because his English wasn't fluent.

I was born and raised in a culture where religious philosophy penetrates every aspect of life. Religious rituals are highly valued and a critical part of community life. Participants' roles, ritual implements, colors, and so on are laden with meaning in my home Tibetan community. It was partly because of this that I noticed every detail that day. Joe, the master practitioner, was a serious man in his forties. He had never married. He often wore two strings of prayer beads on his left wrist and he carried a Bible wherever he went. He was very sincere, had a very impressive voice, and rarely joked, even when we drank together. He carefully chose each word he uttered and had a certain charisma that made him even more convincing and believable. This was especially true when he spoke to visitors in Tagalog, though I didn't understand what he was saying. His expression told me that he was serious about what he was saying.

On this particular day, he wore a pair of camo-shorts and a white T-shirt. There was nothing special about the way he was dressed. The same was true for Madi and Alex, who had come along to assist Joe. I noticed Madi had two bags. Alex was holding a stick that was about a foot long. I guessed it was not going to be a large-scale ritual. It was a short walk to the home we would visit. There was no time to ask Joe more questions about what he practiced. When we arrived, a woman greeted us and led us into the sitting room where she left us.

I looked around and was both surprised and puzzled by what I saw. There were no overt signs of a religious nature - no sacred images, for example, which are quite common in the homes of Dela Costa residents who nearly all seemed to be Catholic.

The kitchen, dining room, and bathroom were on the first floor. There was little free space to move around. A twenty-two-inch TV, made in China, sat on a large wooden table next to the door



against the window. The TV obscured most of the window. The room was dark. A fan mounted on the wall was above the window. In a hot place like Manila, fans made life bearable and this family had a fan in every corner. Atop the TV was a huge Chinese hand fan for decorative purposes. Next to the TV was a porcelain vase holding beautiful flowers. I went close to take a picture and was surprised to see 'Made in China' on one leaf.

In front of the TV was a small free space. I sat on the wooden floor and looked around the room. Joe was sitting in an armchair against the wall next to the door, getting ready to go into trance. Right above him was a picture of Filipino boxing hero, Manny Pacquiao.

"Come and help me light these candles," Madi said as I was inspecting the room.

I opened one bag and found four small white candles, a fist-sized ball of wool, and a couple of small bottles. Meanwhile, Alex was making a fire in a small concrete stove on which he placed a kettle. Then he picked up the metal stick and rolled a piece of wool around the head of the stick. Joe instructed him to put small bundles of wool containing sacred objects in each corner of the room and above the door. I finished lighting the candles and placed them on a glass table next to where Joe was sitting.

Joe's eyes were closed and his hands were on his thighs with his palms up. Madi sat in a small wooden chair just in front of Joe. Madi opened the Bible he had brought with him and turned to a page marked with a slip of paper. He started reading. A few minutes later Joe's hands began shaking as he breathed heavily. It was frightening because it seemed the real Joe wasn't there anymore. Madi continued reading. It seemed he was instructing Joe, whose upper body was now trembling rhythmically, matching the changes in Madi's intonations.

Joe began sweating profusely and then, suddenly, he started murmuring. His eyes were still closed. Alex approached and seemed to understand what he was saying because he kept nodding his head. I understand only that it didn't sound like the Tagalog I heard every day in Dela Costa homes. Joe occasionally made faces as though he



were in great pain or perhaps very sad because of his seeming inability to communicate. His eyebrows rose rhythmically as his tone changed. His eyes remained closed throughout the entire process. His lips kept moving, though nothing that sounded remotely like a human language emerged from his lips. It seemed as if he was trying to say something but couldn't get the words right. It was all exotic but, at the same time, exhausting to see Joe sweating and struggling to speak.

I was reminded of a scene from one of my recurring dreams: I was being chased by a huge dog. I was desperately trying to scream for help, but it took tremendous effort to make a sound.

When exorcisms are performed back home, strange sounds of unknown origins are often heard and objects fall to the ground without human involvement. I looked around, wondering if something like that would happen here. It didn't.

About a half hour later, Madi ceased his recitation. I waited anxiously to see who of the family might come, but they never appeared. It seemed that the presence of a concerned family member was taboo. We then packed up what we had brought and headed back to Madi's place.

You probably were expecting something more dramatic. I was too. It was all quite tame. However, I was struck by how familiar the idea of the existence of evil spirits was, and also how these local people believed that it was possible to remove such spirits.

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A week passed. It was another usual, hot Saturday in mid-October. I was staying at a boarding house that belonged to a couple who had moved to the US. They had left the house in the care of the wife's brother, who was married and had a daughter. However, he didn't live with his wife and daughter. He also had quite a few friends who visited him on weekends to drink.

"Do you eat dogs?" Dori asked me in Cantonese. It took me a few seconds to realize he was speaking a variety of Chinese that I could barely comprehend.

"No. Nobody from my community eats dogs," I said.

"Chinese people eat dogs," he said.



"Where did you see Chinese people eating dogs?" I asked, wondering if he had really seen people eating dogs or if he was just curious about rumors he had heard.

"Did you ever wonder why I can speak Cantonese?" he asked with a dismissive smile, obviously proud to be able to speak Chinese. Later, I thought I should have shown more interest in his Chinese language ability.

"You look Chinese. I thought maybe you were from China," I said as he handed me a wooden chair. We then sat under a big tree near the local basketball court and chatted. He told me more about himself:

I was twenty-five when I first came to Manila. Life in the city was exciting, but I was at a loss. I didn't know what to do, where to live, or where to look for a job. One day as I was walking aimlessly in the city center, a man approached me and asked, "Are you looking for a job?"

I was excited and said, "Yes!" Then he took me to lunch in a nearby KFC. It was my first time to eat at a KFC. He kept talking while I was eating, but I didn't pay much attention. When I finished eating, I suddenly realized that such good things don't happen without a reason. I then tried to remember every detail of what he had said. This man was well-dressed and about forty years old. There was nothing suspicious about him. He just seemed to be a nice guy who liked to help others.

"There is a good opportunity to make some money if you are interested," he said calmly. There was no sense of encouragement as if he didn't really care if I said yes or no. That made me even more uncomfortable. I would have felt much better if he had encouraged me a bit. Anyway, I said that I was interested and a few days later, I was headed to China. There were fifteen of us from the Philippines on the same boat. We didn't know each other before but, during the several days it took to reach China on that boat, we got to know each other pretty well. It was exciting and, at the same time, worrying. We docked on a cold afternoon in October. It had been burning hot back home, but it was freezing in China. We hadn't brought any warm clothes with us, thinking China was also going to be hot. Nobody had told us about the weather.



When I got outside, I looked up and saw a dim, red sun that resembled a fading torch. The dock was huge with hundreds of ships there. We waited anxiously. We had been told someone would meet us at the dock. Thousands of thoughts flitted through my mind. I tried my best to conceal them. It was obvious that everyone was worried about our uncertain future.

I looked around and felt comforted to see English words - USA, France, Canada, and the names of other countries - on gigantic containers that were piled up about seven floors high. I kept looking, hoping to see "Philippines" and then meet someone from the Philippines. I believed that if I could meet them, they would help us. But there was no Philippines anywhere. I felt kind of scared.

A few hours later, a man approached us and spoke to us in heavily accented English. It was really difficult to understand him, but we were happy that someone had finally come to meet us. All fifteen of us then got into a van. After leaving the dock, the first thing I noticed was the huge number of people. As we drove along a busy road, there were people everywhere. Sometimes all I could see was just heads. It was like looking at a nest of ants. It was very crowded, even on the roads. I wouldn't have really believed what I saw that very first day except that I went back there a year later and it was just like before.

There were small restaurants in the open area that had gutted dogs hanging on hooks. It was a terrifying scene. Nevertheless, these small restaurants were crowded with customers. I felt like vomiting, partly because of the awfulness of this scene and also because I was worried about myself. I thought, "If I die here, will anyone know or care?" I had never felt so uncertain, but I did feel better when I saw that the others in the van had the same look in their eyes.

We did construction work in that town for three years. Then we had a two-year break, returned, and worked for another two years.

"Do you have plans to go back and work again?" I asked Dori, who now was lying on the ground on his side, supporting his head with his right arm.

"No. The work's too hard. I can't do such hard physical labor now," he said, sipping from a bottle that seemed to contain an inexhaustible amount of beer. He looked at the bottle and continued,



"I could certainly tell you more about my experience if I had more beer."

I wasn't sure his story was worth the investment, but I knew I had to be diplomatic. "I can buy you some beer, but not today. You look tipsy already," I said. The basketball court was now full of kids and very noisy, so I retreated back to my room.

...

"Really! That's why Adriano moved out?" asked Alex, "I thought both of you were coming with us. This is the holy mountain everyone visits. You will see lots of interesting things there."

"He couldn't get along with Madi," I said. "Maybe we can ask Joe for a divination to find out why they can't get along."

Everyone laughed hysterically at this.

A week later I was in a Jeep with Madi's friends on our way to Mount Banahaw, one of the Philippines' holy mountains. They insisted that I go with them because, as Alex said, "We do special religious practices there that you won't ever learn about if you don't come with us."

I have always been curious and was intrigued by what he said. Before I agreed, I went over a few things carefully in my mind. I was from a different religious background. Though this didn't stand in the way of our friendship and sharing ideas and experiences, I didn't want to be caught between two different belief systems. That worried me as I participated in their practices.

"Tonight, we will stay in the church and you can participate in the ritual or just watch," Alex said.

There were six of us in the jeep. One was a scientist who worked for the government. Another man drove a school-bus. We had set off early that morning. It was beautiful along the way. Everything was green and there were animals that I had never seen before. We were already in the mountains by four that afternoon.

"We will first visit the mountain deity," Joe said decisively, as fit his position as our group leader. "We will show our new friend real miracles today," he continued solemnly, suggesting that he would soon be involved in a serious undertaking.

This made me nervous because I didn't want to return home



as a Catholic convert. I was not sure what power he really had and how he was going to use it. It was an uneasy moment. Madi, who was sitting next to me, giggled, as he always did when he saw me confused and uncertain. He enjoyed seeing people taken by surprise. I felt I was being taken advantage of, but I also thought I was being too protective of myself.

"Is there a mountain deity here?" I asked, trying to sound really surprised, to show how interested I was in learning more. I leaned towards Joe, who was sitting in the front seat.

"Yes, and we will speak to him today," said Madi as he patted my right leg a few times. "He recognizes and protects us."

"You can ask him to protect you, too," suggested Alex and laughed, as if he thought that this was a weird idea.

I usually enjoyed getting attention, but now I felt nervous and didn't like the fact that they were suggesting that I do this and that.

We drove over a narrow track to the mountain deity altar. The road was slippery and covered with bushes. I couldn't remember when the last time was that I had been on such a frightening, nerve-racking ride. The wife of the scientist continued repeating non-stop, "Jesus help, Jesus help..." in a trembling voice and increasing our anxiety.

When we reached the mountaintop, we got out of the jeep and I followed my companions to the base of a huge tree where two wooden boards had been laid flat on the ground. Various food and fruit had been placed there. As they all knelt in front of the tree and began praying, I sat on a big leaf and watched. Suddenly, it began raining. We all rushed to the jeep and headed to the church.

A terribly frightening experience lay in store. As I stood in front of the old church, I thought, "How will I sleep in this church tonight? They will go into trance and won't be aware of anything around us. What should I do?"

A huge tree obscured my view of the church. It was now evening and the dim moonlight, the tree, and the church blended together and seemed somehow to be a gigantic moving creature, peeking through thick trees. Small statues attached to the outside wooden walls of the church seemed to smile menacingly at each



other, taking perverse delight in the presence of an unfamiliar face. I comforted myself by thinking that the statue of Buddha I had seen earlier by the two boards with food offerings would ensure my safety and protect me from harm.

"Come in! We're about to start," Madi called.

"Oh! Why did you yell? You scared me!" I said, no longer able to pretend.

It was around ten PM. We put the benches in the church along one side of the room so that we could use them as a bed that night. Everyone sat in a circle close enough to be able to touch the person next to them. After fruitless attempts to persuade me to join them, they continued without me in their circle. Joe, the leader, sat on a chair close to the wall and gave instructions. There was no electricity in the church. Candles that we had brought were the only source of light. They flickered near the window.

I sat next to Joe with my camera. I turned my head to look at the image of Jesus hanging in the center of the front part of the church. It looked very dramatic in the flickering dim light that danced on Jesus's face and upper body. There were two angels with their wings spread. One was on either side of the Jesus statue. They had looked lovely when I first entered the church, but now their faces had changed. I felt the presence of sorrow and evil. I can't explain exactly why, but I was afraid.

I couldn't sit still. I turned to my friends. Their faces revealed utter peace and calm. They sat straight with closed eyes. It was a time of silence.

I was aware that my breathing was becoming louder and louder. Suddenly, the images seemed to be closing in on me. I felt that I was being suffocated as if the angels were flying near us. I could feel the wind from their flapping wings.

With no forewarning, Joe began shaking wildly. I was so scared my arms went numb. The rest of the group began shaking. I regretted not joining them. If I had, I reasoned, I would not be so terrified. I raised my camera to take a picture, but then I thought I might see something truly terrifying through the lens so I put my camera away.



Alex was completely out of control. His upper body was swaying wildly and his arms were waving madly. A candle was knocked over. I rushed over and put out the candle. I stood, watching everyone shaking and murmuring. I again regretted not participating. Somehow, I regained a sense of the present and tried to hold Alex who, by this time, was banging his head on the floor. I couldn't stop him. I didn't know what to do. I went to Madi and patted his shoulder, but he did not respond.

I went back to Alex and put a jacket under his head. Then the scientist's wife started screaming and pulling at her hair. I jumped. I was totally unready for what I was experiencing and seeing. I went to Joe and hit his head with the Bible he had earlier placed by his side. When he returned to a more normal state, I was calm enough to observe a chaotic scene that was strangely miraculous. They were obviously possessed by a spirit. There is no other way to explain how a normal human would jerk out their own hair and speak in a language that they did not understand, but made sense to Joe, who explained after the ritual what everyone had said while they were possessed.

It was amusing to watch Madi making all sorts of faces and gestures that so sharply contrasted with his usual personality. I couldn't control myself and laughed.

Joe waved me over and said, "A mountain deity has possessed Madi."

I believed that. It was all taking place in front of my eyes. I just couldn't believe the possibility that Madi, whom I had known for a year, was capable of putting on such an act.



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"Wake up, we're back home," Madi said.

"You didn't sleep last night. You look tired," Joe said, handing me my bag.

I got out of the vehicle and said, "I can't believe what happened last night. If we weren't unpacking from the trip, I would think it was all just a dream."

I had thousands of questions for my friends but, somehow, I never found the right time to ask them. I thought I was trying to deny something. It was a confusing experience, waking up thinking about what I had seen on the holy mountain, and then walking downstairs and seeing the same people engulfed in the same ordinary life dramas as everyone else.

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A few months later, we were sitting and drinking around a table. Before I became totally drunk, I asked them where that Buddha image on Mount Banahaw was from. I'm still looking for an answer to that question.




ELOPEMENT<sup>1</sup>

Thub bstan ཐུབ་བསྟན་

I graduated from Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Normal University's English Training Program (ETP) in 2006. In 2009, I earned an MA in Sociology from Silliman University in the Philippines. Since that time, I have worked in a non-government organization on the Plateau. I enjoy working in rural communities to identify problems and their solutions.

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his is a true story that happened in March 2012, in Ku'u sgang Village, which is situated in a forested, mountainous area about five kilometers off a national road along the Shis chu River that runs through Brag 'go Valley. The relative remoteness and lack of a proper road have left forest and lush grazing land largely intact for villagers and their handful of livestock. Plenty of wild mushrooms and flowers grow near the village, and it is also an ideal place for cultivating barley, peas, and potatoes. Monkeys scamper about in the forest, which is also home to brown bears, wild boars, and white-lipped deer. This is a place many would liken to paradise.

During my childhood in the 1990s, Ku'u sgang Village had only ten households. Later, two village families moved near the nearest major road for the sake of convenience. Meanwhile, three new households were established. Today, this beautiful village is home to eleven households and has a total population of sixty-two people.

The village includes two families with Chinese surnames (Huang and Zhou) and two other families with Chinese sons-in-law (surnamed Zhang and Wang). People of the relatively near roadside villages refer to Ku'u sgang as Rgya ri zhing or 'mountain fields reclaimed by Chinese'. My generation is the fourth of the Huang Family. As descendants of the root family of Huang, my older brother, younger sister, and I have Chinese names. We are called the dragon character generation, which signifies that the first character

<sup>1</sup> Thub bstan (Tudeng). 2013. Elopement. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 28:237-247.



of all our given names is "Dragon." However, in my generation, we rarely use our Chinese names and the names on our official identification cards are Tibetan, unlike the older generations. I have seventeen cousins who do not have Chinese names. In the Chinese tradition, sons and daughters inherit the surnames of their fathers; however, my uncles married and moved into Tibetan homes, or else established their own independent homes, and thus feel little obligation to pass on a Chinese surname to their offspring.

My paternal grandfather's father was a drifter from somewhere near Chengdu City. He married our great-grandmother after he was kicked out of his first wife's home. Great-grandmother was from Nyag rong County, where she lived as a nomad. Her brother murdered someone in a rangeland conflict and, subsequently, she and her family fled to Brag 'go County to escape reprisal. Great-grandfather somehow met Great-grandmother and they moved to Ku'u sgang. Their descendants had both Chinese and Tibetan names.

These great-grandparents had five sons. My paternal grandparents had nine children. My third uncle, an articulate man locally famous for his stubbornness, established his own family in the village a year after my birth. He has three daughters. The oldest is finishing her fifth year in medical college, the youngest is a middle school student, and the middle one, Sgrol ma, dropped out of middle school several years ago to stay at home and help her parents.

Sgrol ma was born in 1990. She is tall and her eyes startle people because they seem as large as the eyes of a yak. She wears traditional robes like other village women. Sgrol ma was regarded as the most beautiful girl in our village.

For five years, her father worked very hard as a laborer at construction sites and as a carpenter for dozens of local families who were building new homes. He did this to pay for his daughters' school expenses and otherwise support the family. Once, he fell off a tractor and broke two ribs while transporting logs to sell. The pain and worry from this accident seemed to make him age significantly overnight as if life had become suddenly burdensome. Nevertheless, he has never given up.

Uncle is practical and planned to do whatever was necessary



to send his oldest daughter to college, hoping that she would get a government job and then be able to support the youngest daughter to attend college. Meanwhile, he wanted Sgrol ma to marry and bring her husband into their home after the eldest daughter graduated. Uncle realized that Sgrol ma's future husband would be resentful if he moved into the home and saw the income that he helped earn paying for Sgrol ma's sisters' schooling. Knowing this might cause problems, he decided to wait a bit before arranging Sgrol ma's marriage. This was the plan until a messenger came from the other side of the river and announced that Sgrol ma had eloped.

Two marriage forms are practiced locally - marriages arranged by family members and *sa 'bud* 'fleeing'. Arranged marriages ignore the feelings of the youths most directly involved. Parents ask their most trusted relatives to look for potential spouses from reputable families or, at least, who seem well behaved and whose families lack a history of such diseases as leprosy and tuberculosis. Parents consult a wide range of contacts about the qualities of potential spouses. Once both sides reach a preliminary agreement, negotiations ensue. One of the first things mentioned is how well the new in-law will be treated in the home they will move into.

The second topic of discussion is "marriage price," or *mo rin* 'brideprice' when a girl moves into her husband's home, and *pho rin* 'price of the groom' when a boy will marry and move into his wife's home. *Nu rin* 'milk price' or 'nursing price' refers to compensation paid to the mother who nursed the bride or groom who is leaving to their spouse's home. *Nu rin* is very small compared to *pho rin* and *mo rin*.

In most cases, the sentiments embedded in the phrase *shug pa ri la bcad nas ri la mchod* 'juniper cut from the mountain is burned to venerate the mountain' is followed. The spouse marrying-in brings with them property or cash that exceeds what has been paid as *pho rin* or *mo rin*.

*Sa 'bud* refers to two very different situations - fleeing revenge - like my great-grandfather - and elopement. The practice of elopement leaves the parents of both sides in a passive situation since



the young couple has an agreement before they flee to the house of a friend or relative, who then informs the parents to prepare for a negotiation.

The news of Cousin's elopement was a bolt from the blue. Uncle had been asking around about a son-in-law for about a year. Local villagers had gotten accustomed to this and imagined she would agree to whatever marriage her father arranged for her. Her disappearance raised many questions: What was the couple's plan? With whom had Sgrol ma eloped? Who were his parents?

Cousin had escaped with thirty-eight-year-old Tshe ring. According to rumor, he was an ugly, novice carpenter, had long hair, was a childless divorcee, had left his wife's home without so much as a needle, and had lived with a nomad girl for a year after his divorce.

Meanwhile, Tshe ring's brother and parents had forced their first daughter-in-law out of their home after she was unable to give birth again after her first son. Tshe ring's brother then found a woman from the next county and married her. Time passed and she drove her parents-in-law out of the home. Tshe ring then lived with his parents in an abandoned primary school building while constructing a new home nearby.

This information about Tshe ring and his family's colorful background further weakened Uncle's already tired, worn-out body. He called my father for a discussion. Father then took me and my brother to Uncle's home.

Uncle was old enough to remember the earthquake that shook our county in 1973. Local wooden houses became famous for their resilience in the face of earthquakes. Uncle's house is unique in the village because, unlike others, there is no ground floor for livestock. Uncle reasons that two-story wood houses are weaker than one-story houses during earthquakes.

When we reached Uncle's home, Aunt came out to greet us and open the courtyard gate. She had more white hair than the last time I had seen her, and her moist cheeks told us that she'd been weeping. When we entered the kitchen, I noticed felt rugs scattered on the floor. Uncle looked much darker and older than the last time I had seen him. He sat in a corner with a jug of home-made barley



liquor and a big chunk of raw yak meat on a plate in front of him. It was obvious he had been drinking. Raw yak meat is a delicacy served at festivals to honored guests. Barley liquor is generally served with raw yak meat. Today, however, festivity and joy seemed to be sadly absent.

He told Aunt to bring tea. I then looked more carefully at Aunt. Her upper body seemed to bend forward in a way that formed a right angle, as though she were being inexorably pulled to the center of the earth by the force of gravity. I then realized how terrible the process of aging is and what tragic consequences it has.

Uncle said, "A messenger came today and told us that Sgrol ma wishes to live in the man's home and serve his parents."

We could hardly believe our ears! Sgrol ma had been designated as the one to stay in her own parents' home and care for them. This was catastrophic news for Uncle and Aunt.

Uncle continued in a shaky voice, "I would like to hear my daughter confirm this. She fully understood that she was supposed to stay at home with us."

Uncle felt terribly betrayed by his own daughter.

The timing of Sgrol ma's elopement was particularly difficult because Uncle's father - my grandfather - had passed away only five months earlier. His closest relatives now were to observe certain cultural taboos. For a year they should hold no celebrations - no weddings, and no New Year festivities. Any sort of celebration was strictly forbidden. The family could not even observe mountain deity worship during that year since the whole village celebrates after such rituals. Furthermore, those who touch a corpse should not enter the family shrine. Locals think that they have *lag btsog pa* 'polluted hands'. The deceased's close relatives also do not wash their hair and face during the forty-nine days after death, nor do they cut their hair or shave for a year.

The more we learned about Tshe ring, the surer we became that Sgrol ma had been deceived rather than fallen in love. As this conviction grew stronger, we held some hope that she might return to her parents alone, or with Tshe ring.

Tradition dictated that a few of Tshe ring's closest relatives



would come the next day to negotiate. After discussion, we agreed to send some of our relatives to visit Tshe ring's parents early the next morning to assume an aggressive role, rather than passively wait.

The next morning, Father and Uncle's older brother - who I will call Second Uncle - rode motorcycles along a twisting mountain road and crossed the river to visit Tshe ring's parents on the other side of the valley. When they arrived, it was so early that the old parents had not yet gotten up. They quickly scrambled up and put on their clothes.

Father then put a bottle of liquor wrapped in a *kha dar*<sup>1</sup> on the table and said, "You two must have heard about the children's elopement. We have come to say that Sgrol ma's parents are very proud to have your son as a son-in-law. We heard that you have your first son caring for you. Sgrol ma has been designated by her parents to serve them. We have come to take your son and Sgrol ma to her parents' home."

His parents silently stared at each other for a few seconds and then began to relate how they had been kicked out of their home by their son's wife and other pathetic stories we had heard before. After giving a detailed account of these miseries, they cunningly concluded, "This young couple has decided to live here and we feel we must honor their decision."

Three of Tshe ring's relatives had been chosen to visit Uncle and Aunt, but we had come first so their visit was no longer appropriate. After about an hour, Tshe ring's father received a phone call from one of those representatives. During the conversation, he told him to come to his home.

Three representatives then soon arrived with a bottle of liquor and a *kha dar*, which they tried to give Father and Second Uncle to take to Uncle. However, these gifts were politely refused. Father and Second Uncle then left for the messenger's village where Sgrol ma and Tshe ring were staying to hear Sgrol ma's side of the story.

That village was located in a valley only twenty minutes by motorcycle from the old primary school. Cousin called the

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<sup>1</sup> Strip of ceremonial silk, i.e., *kha btags*. A bottle of liquor wrapped in a *kha dar*, when accepted, signifies acceptance of the proposal.



representative and told him to inform Sgrol ma to come and meet them at the shrine the villagers had built at a spot just outside the village.

When Sgrol ma appeared, Second Uncle scolded, "How heartless of you to leave your parents like this! Your father worked so hard to raise you and the other two girls, and now this is how you repay him!"

Sgrol ma put her head down and said nothing.

"Did you know that Tshe ring is second-hand goods?" he continued.

Sgrol ma raised her head in shock and asked, "Who told you that? He never said anything about that."

Realizing that Tshe ring had lied from the very beginning, she put her head between her knees and began weeping. At this point, we felt there was some hope she would return to her parents. We also pitied Sgrol ma, who had so obviously been deceived, and understood that we had to handle this matter very carefully. If Sgrol ma left for her parents' home without a word, then Tshe ring's relatives would probably come and ask for compensation, because she had broken the tacit agreement she had made by eloping with him.

Finally, there was agreement that Sgrol ma would talk to Tshe ring about what he had so conveniently omitted from his life story. Meanwhile, our side would continue negotiating with Tshe ring's relatives. Since Tshe ring had never told her about his first marriage, it seemed that there had not been a real elopement but a conspiracy. Representing the relationship in this way meant we would have a better chance to prevail in negotiations and then be compensated.

We returned and reported the whole story to the elders who were preparing for negotiations. They were upset to hear what had happened but still had hope. We thought it would be good for Sgrol ma to leave Tshe ring, who had been deceitful from the beginning. However, a call from Sgrol ma's older sister vanquished this hope. She said that Sgrol ma had called her and said that if she returned home, she would be considered used goods and would never be able to find a husband and, furthermore, villagers would denigrate her behind her back. Given these realities, Sgrol ma had opted to honor



the elopement. This decision dishonored all her relatives, causing even more frustration.

The next day, Tshe ring's representatives came to Uncle's home. Since Sgrol ma had said she supported the agreement, our side could do little. Uncle was not in the mood for negotiation. He just wanted to know clearly from the visitors if there was a matchmaker among them. Uncle said, "Tshe ring never told Sgrol ma that he had been married before. This convinces us that this is a conspiracy rather than an elopement. We think there must be a matchmaker who bragged about how nice Tshe ring is and how nice his family is for my girl. The oldest person from your family needs to swear that there was no matchmaker of any kind. Only then can we start negotiations."

After a discussion on their side, they called Tshe ring because someone from this group needed to make an oath. After a break, they reassembled for further negotiation that centered on the issue of the matchmaker. An old man with a wrinkled face stroked his white beard and said, "We asked Tshe ring. He said that there was no matchmaker. As the oldest representative, I will swear an oath."

Locally, it is believed that there are terrible consequences to falsely swearing an oath. Whoever swears such an oath will be born in Hell after their death and their tongue will be pulled until it is as long as a field and then plowed repeatedly. Given the seriousness of swearing an oath, it occupies a central role in negotiations. Oaths can be made by holding a *bla ma*'s picture over the head, holding a door handle of a monastery both parties respect, and so on. The negotiation at Uncle's home took place in the living room, which featured several images of *bla ma* and deities on the walls. The old man representing Tshe ring swore while facing a picture of a *bla ma* hanging on the wall. As soon as the oath was finished, our side raised such questions as: "Was there a matchmaker of any sort, such as someone giving out Sgrol ma's or her family's phone number? This is also considered matchmaking."

The old man's face turned deathly pale at once and then he said, "I'm very sorry. Tshe ring told us that there was a man who gave him a phone number."



Uncle immediately asked the name of the man who had given the number, but they begged for forgiveness and refused to tell his name. Giving out phone numbers is common among young people, but this action also connotes matchmaking. Their side was afraid that revealing this man's name would lead to more conflict.

Uncle then phoned his oldest daughter and told her to call Sgrol ma for a clear answer, but the response was similar. It was clear that Sgrol ma, for whatever reasons, didn't want to specify the man's name. Though she might have been deceived, she understood that the wrong answer could set off a blood feud - there were plenty of local examples. Now she had to accept her fate by honoring the elopement agreement, and also suffer from the knowledge that her family had been terribly humiliated.

Sgrol ma called as negotiations continued. Uncle stood and went outside to talk to her. After several minutes, he returned and said, "My girl called. She told me she will honor the agreement no matter what."

The negotiators from our side were suddenly deflated.

Unwilling to respond immediately, Uncle told the representatives from Tshe ring's side to come again the next day for another round of negotiation.

The next day's meeting was brief. Uncle asked for 20,000 RMB for *mo rin*, and 3,000 RMB for *nu rin*. Tshe ring's relatives agreed at once, though this exceeded the local record for such payments. The old man who had sworn the oath searched his pocket and pulled out 500 RMB and a *kha dar* as a gesture to ask for forgiveness for the false oath he had sworn the day before.

Marriage negotiations usually have a happy ending. Everything seemed headed in this direction until Uncle abruptly announced, "Please inform my daughter not to cross the threshold of this home for three years. After three years, I will see what mood I'm in to arrange a dowry," and then he concluded by swearing an oath.

Everyone was shocked.

He added, "Tell her to be happy with her choice, live wherever she chooses, and not to do anything that would lead me to break my oath."



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Tshe ring's relatives then departed victoriously, but somewhat bitterly.

Everything returned to normal. The village was soon as quiet as ever. Our tempers cooled after accepting that Cousin had made her own decision. It was her life to decide, not her father's and, of course, not ours either.

Several days later, I heard a rumor making the rounds in the village. Sgrol ma had, it was said, told a friend, "Father and my uncles were looking for a husband for me all over the place for a year. It seemed nobody wanted to marry me. The rumors I heard about me made me so ashamed that I no longer wanted to stay in the village."



LOVE IN SHAMBHALA<sup>1</sup>

'Ba' blo bzang mgon po འབའ་བློ་བཟང་མགོན་པོ།

I was born in 1984 in Btsal ba Village, Gru ba lung Township, 'Ba' thang County, Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China. I graduated with a degree in Tibetan-English-Chinese translation from Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Normal University in 2006.

Dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan, who features in this story, lived about a century ago in Btsal ba Village. Locals said that he went to Shambhala after he passed beyond suffering. This story illustrates the possibility of love not only between two people but also between different ethnic groups and religions while emphasizing Buddhist compassion toward animals - even tiny ants. The story suggests that when all sentient creatures and religions are held in equal respect, the world will be at peace.

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**B**kra shis was exhausted. He lay on a small bed in his home shrine room. Laymen rarely sat or slept on this bed, because it had been given by a highly respected local incarnation *bla ma*, Dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan, who had spent much of his life meditating alone in a cave. Local elders said that the great *bla ma* passed beyond suffering, leaving nothing behind but his fingernails and toenails, a sign of great spiritual attainment.

Bkra shis tightly gripped his head in his hands and thought, "I have seen the bodies of many great masters much reduced in size as they meditated for several months on their throne after they stopped breathing. Why did Dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan leave only hair and nails? Is this enlightenment? Where did he go after his death? Did he go to the Kingdom of Shambhala?" These questions swirled about in his mind as his eyes slowly closed and he drifted off to sleep.

He stretched out on the bed with both shoes on, and after he was deeply asleep, he dreamed...

<sup>1</sup> Ba. Lobsang Gonbo ('Ba' blo bzang mgon po). 2013. Love in Shambhala. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 28:249-262.



He was having breakfast at his home while his mother saddled his black horse. Then she went into the garden, pulled up a few handfuls of grass, picked some pears and apples from their fruit trees, and put the fruit in a knitted woolen bag. She fed the horse with the grass she had just pulled, then quickly returned to the second floor and burned sacred juniper in the stove, which produced much fragrant smoke. She told Bkra shis to let the smoke waft over him to bring him luck during his journey to collect caterpillar fungus on the mountains. She then went to the shrine room, took an amulet, and put it on a string around his neck. They touched their foreheads together to say goodbye.

Bkra shis said, "Mother, I'll miss you! Take care," and then walked to a neighbor's big walnut tree, collected some walnuts, and put them in his leather bag before mounting his black horse and riding off. While riding, he repacked the special gift he had prepared for his girlfriend.

After two hours of riding, the horse was coated with sweat. Bkra shis dismounted, rested in a forest near a small pasture, and watched his horse graze on the fresh grass. Climbing up a big pine tree he looked down at his home village, which he could still clearly see. The village was surrounded by mountains. A clear brook ran at the southern edge of the village. Terraced fields sprouted corn and buckwheat.

As Bkra shis recalled the doting care his mother had shown him before he left, he wiped away tears with his robe's long sleeves. He slowly climbed down from the pine tree, got on his horse, and ambled toward the herding area.

After another three hours of riding, he reached the Li shul Grassland where many young people from Btsal ba Village were pitching black tents. Both Bkra shis's brother, Nyi ma, and their father, Rgya mtsho, looked up and smiled when they saw Bkra shis and his horse approaching. Crossing a small stream, Bkra shis quickly dismounted and greeted his father by pressing his forehead against his father's. When Bkra shis entered the tent, his brother was churning butter tea. His father was now sitting cross-legged on the floor. After making the tea, Nyi ma sat next to his father. Bkra shis then sat next to Nyi ma. His father handed him a chunk of butter and some roasted barley flour saying, "You must be hungry. It's a long journey. Have some *rtsam pa*."



Bkra shis took his wooden bowl from a leather bag and began making *rtsam pa*.

His brother Nyi ma asked, "How's Mother?"

"She's fine. She gave me some fruit for you and Father," Bkra shis replied.

Nyi ma was delighted to hear this and stood up to take the offered leather bag. Neighbors began arriving at the tent to see who had arrived and what they had brought from the village. Bkra shis looked around at the people, seemingly searching for something or someone. He responded absent-mindedly when a neighbor spoke to him. It had been a long while since he had seen his girlfriend, Gser skyid me tog. Their relationship was still secret. None of Gser skyid me tog's family members came to Bkra shis's tent because Bkra shis's family members regarded them as enemies. Gser skyid me tog's grandfather had killed Bkra shis's grandfather ten years earlier. The two families had not spoken to each other since.

Thinking about the best way to offer the gift he had prepared for Gser skyid me tog, Bkra shis asked his father, "Where are our livestock? Are they on the southern grassland?"

His father replied, "Yes, do you want to go find them?"

Bkra shis happily replied, "Sure! I'll go now."

He draped his herding sling over his shoulder, took out the gift he had prepared, and put it inside his robe. When he passed Gser skyid me tog's tent he gave a special whistle they used to signal it was time to meet, and then he continued on to the grassland.

Bkra shis's gift consisted of a silver ring, a scarf, and a pair of leather gloves. He also picked twenty-five lovely red flowers from the many decorating the grassland and thought, "How should I present all of this to her? Should I embrace and kiss her? Will she accept my love and the engagement ring?"

Bkra shis sat on the green grassland and gazed into the distance. Some wild blue sheep were frolicking with the yaks and sheep. All Btsal ba villagers were Buddhists and believed that animals and humans were equal. Nobody dared disturb these wild creatures. Bkra shis enjoyed the fragrance of flowers around him, and the azure sky high above.



After a while, he noticed a tall girl with an attractive figure approaching. His nervous heart throbbed and he gripped the bouquet in front of his chest with both hands. Surprised to see Bkra shis with a bunch of flowers, Gser skyid me tog walked slowly toward him with her head down. Meanwhile, Bkra shis summoned his courage, handed her the flowers, and murmured, "These twenty-five flowers symbolize your age and love for me."

Gser skyid me tog took the flowers, sniffed each, and said, "Thank you! They are truly lovely."

"You're welcome. I also brought some other gifts for you. Do you want to see them?" replied Bkra shis.

Of course, Gser skyid me tog was eager to see them.

Bkra shis took out the scarf and leather gloves, put the scarf around her neck, and helped her slip on the gloves. She delightedly thanked him.

Realizing that if she wore the gloves, she couldn't put on the ring, Bkra shis said, "Do you like these gifts?"

Gser skyid me tog said, "Very much!"

Bkra shis took off her left glove, told her to close her eyes, opened the ring box, slipped the ring on the middle finger of her left hand, and then told her to open her eyes. Bkra shis announced, "It's our engagement ring. Will you marry me?"

Gser skyid me tog hesitated before replying, "I'd like to marry you, but our families..." and then tightly embraced him as tears trickled from her eyes. It was their first embrace.

Their hearts throbbed like pounding drums. Bkra shis moved his hand to her upper back and tried to kiss her. Just as their lips and tongues joined, a melodious folk song seemed to burst forth. Gser skyid me tog felt afraid and covered her head and face with the scarf. They then scrambled up the mountain to tend the yaks and sheep. Before they set off in different directions, they agreed on a place to meet the next time.

Gser skyid me tog soon returned home, milked the yaks, and then went inside the tent where her father was offering butter lamps before Buddha images. Her father asked her to make *mdzo sna*, a dish made from wheat flour, liquefied butter, and cheese because it was the



anniversary of Rje tsong kha ba having achieved enlightenment. This is a day when many Tibetans make many butter lamps at home and do not eat meat. After she finished cooking the *mdzo sna*, she invited her father to eat some. Before eating, her father recited scriptures and filled a bowl with *mdzo sna* as an offering to the Three Jewels. He also used a wooden spoon to offer some *mdzo sna* to the ground so that all who had died could also eat. Then he said, "Gser skyid me tog, come eat some *mdzo sna*."

They began eating. Her father ate three bowlfuls.

After discussing the next day's work, they went to bed. Her father drifted quickly into sleep, but Gser skyid me tog tossed and turned as she recalled Bkra shis giving her the gifts and flowers. The flickering of butter lamps and dancing shadows led her to imagine Bkra shis's presence. The wind blew the flames brighter and moved them more quickly. The shadows were more distinct and her heart beat faster. She finally pulled the quilt up over her head and slept.

Bkra shis got up very early the next morning and finished all the housework. He took his spade, put bread in a bag, and went to the place where Gser skyid me tog usually collected caterpillar fungus. He searched and found ten before Gser skyid me tog came. He made a fire to boil water while Gser skyid me tog looked for caterpillar fungus. A couple of hours later, Bkra shis called her to come and eat.

Gser skyid me tog said that she hadn't found a single fungus, because she had slept poorly the night before. She added, "I can't eat now because Father will scold me if I find no caterpillar fungus."

Bkra shis hugged her and said, "It's important to eat. I promise I'll give you some fungus if you don't find any this afternoon."

She smiled and said, "Really? You're very kind to me."

"Of course, because you are my future wife."

They ate together. Gser skyid me tog's eager eyes told Bkra shis what she wanted. Bkra shis then tightly embraced her and kissed her for a long time. He was very proud to have finished, at long last, the first passionate kiss of his life, even though Gser skyid me tog had kissed him so hard it had left a small wound on his tongue. Meanwhile, Gser skyid me tog's uncle was peeping at them from behind a clump of bushes. As the sun moved toward the horizon, Bkra shis gave most of



the fungus he had collected to his girlfriend.

Gser skyid me tog's father glared at her when she entered their tent and angrily demanded, "How many caterpillar fungus did you bring? Who were you with?"

"I got eight fungus. I was alone," she replied quietly.

Her father seemed to know something but said nothing. Gser skyid me tog picked up her wooden bucket and went to milk the yaks. While milking the last one, Bkra shis suddenly appeared asking, "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine, but you need to leave - quickly!" she cautioned. Full of curiosity, Bkra shis lingered. Suddenly, Gser skyid me tog's father shouted and rushed at them with a knife. As her father lunged at Bkra shis, Gser skyid me tog grabbed the knife, and her hands immediately began dripping blood. While continuing to grip the knife, she yelled, "Bkra shis! Run!"

Bkra shis turned and fled.

Gser skyid me tog's relatives soon arrived and took her father into the tent. One of the relatives, Sgrol ma, was a doctor who cleaned the wound with alcohol and then wrapped it with gauze. Gser skyid me tog wept, not from the pain, but from heartache, knowing her father would order her to never meet Bkra shis again.

Bkra shis returned, panting, to his tent. "What's the matter? What happened?" his father inquired.

Bkra shis lied, "Nothing," knowing that if he told the truth his father would fight Thub bstan, Gser skyid me tog's father.

As Bkra shis poured a bowl of butter tea for his father, Nyi ma entered the tent asking, "Bkra shis, are you OK? I heard Thub bstan beat you?"

Bkra shis's father angrily jumped up, grabbed his rifle from the center tent pole, and declared, "We must kill Thub bstan tonight! His father killed my father!"

Bkra shis knelt on the ground and held their legs. Nyi ma shouted, "Bkra shis, what are you doing? Stop this!"

Bkra shis pleaded, "It's my fault! I really love Gser skyid me tog. Please forgive me!"

Bkra shis's father replied, "What? Do you love our enemy's



daughter? Are you mad? I'll forgive you just this once, but you must end your relationship with Gser skyid me tog immediately!"

Bkra shis reluctantly murmured, "I will..."

His father told him to stand up and then told him the story of Bkra shis's and Gser skyid me tog's grandfathers. Bkra shis pretended to listen carefully, but his heart was with Gser skyid me tog. After he finished, Bkra shis's father told his two sons to go to bed. Under his quilt, Bkra shis took his prayer beads from his wrist and prayed for Gser skyid me tog to recover soon.

The next morning, Bkra shis left to collect fungus while Gser skyid me tog stayed in her tent, nursing her wounds. Hearing a drumbeat while walking by a steep cliff Bkra shis looked around and noticed a cave twenty meters up the cliff. He slowly climbed up. As he neared the cave, he saw a tantric specialist with hair in a single long braid beating a drum just outside the cave entrance. Bkra shis happily thought, "I'm very lucky, but he is meditating so I shouldn't disturb him."

The specialist stopped beating the drum and waved to him. Taking off his hat Bkra shis made three prostrations. The specialist asked, "How many caterpillar fungus did you collect? How many people are collecting caterpillar fungus? How did you find me?"

Bkra shis replied, "I have collected only three caterpillar fungus today. More than a thousand people are collecting caterpillar fungus in this area. I'm just passing by."

Shaking his head, the meditator sighed, "Even though caterpillar fungus can be sold for a lot of money, it only brings temporary benefit. Collecting caterpillar fungus damages the environment and harms many future generations."

Bkra shis suddenly changed the topic and asked the specialist to make a divination for his future with Gser skyid me tog.

The specialist agreed. After performing the divinations, he revealed, "The signs are very good. They indicate that she will recover soon. In terms of your relationship, you should both leave for another place. Your families will not agree to your marriage."

Bkra shis thanked him and asked where they should go.

"Go very far away. You will face many difficulties. Are you sure you want to go with her?" responded the specialist.



"Yes, I do! Where exactly should we go?" asked Bkra shis eagerly.

The specialist thought for a moment and said, "Go north to a place called Ka IA pa in the Kingdom of Shambhala. If you decide to go there, you must go very soon. Good luck to you and your future wife," and then he gave more details about Ka IA pa.

After leaving the cave, Bkra shis made plans to go to Shambhala and returned home with only three caterpillar fungus. Bkra shis desperately wanted to communicate with Gser skyid me tog but was afraid to visit her tent. Then he thought of Tshe ring, his best friend, who could be a messenger, because he was also Gser skyid me tog's close relative. Bkra shis went to Tshe ring's tent. Luckily, he was alone. Bkra shis asked him to tell Gser skyid me tog his plan. Tshe ring refused.

Bkra shis then described how much he loved Gser skyid me tog and begged him, with tears in his eyes, to convey his message to Gser skyid me tog.

Moved by Bkra shis's tears and his obvious sincerity, Tshe ring finally agreed. They discussed the plan in detail. Bkra shis planned to leave at midnight in two days' time. He wanted Gser skyid me tog to meet him in a place called Rtsed thang. Meanwhile, he would prepare a yak to transport their belongings and for Gser skyid me tog to ride when she was tired.

At the appointed time, Bkra shis quietly got up and went to Rtsed thang. After about a half hour, Gser skyid me tog arrived. Seeing the trace of tears in her eyes, Bkra shis asked, "Did you cry when you left your tent?"

"No," Gser skyid me tog said, dabbing her eyes with her sleeve. "Will we go to Shambhala? How do we get there? I heard that only highly realized holy people can go there. Is it also possible for laypeople to go there?"

"It is possible. A tantric specialist advised us to go there and gave me detailed directions to Ka IA pa, which is in the Kingdom of Shambhala," Bkra shis replied,

Gser skyid me tog said, "I understand. Shall we start our journey?"

"Yes, let's begin," and then they set off.

After a half-day of travel, they reached Mount Kong btsan. With



its peak covered in snow, the mountain resembled a person wearing a white scarf. They cut some juniper branches and took out clean butter, *rtsam pa*, and tea leaves from what Bkra shis had packed. Gser skyid me tog collected dry wood and grass. After Bkra shis had made a fire, he added juniper branches, wheat flour, *rtsam pa*, and tea leaves and then chanted a prayer dedicated to the mountain deity. Bkra shis broke off a twig from a juniper branch, went to a small stream, doused the twig in the stream, and added it to the smoldering incense offering. He flicked water from the twig onto the smoldering pile of offerings to further purify the area. Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog knelt in front of the offering, prayed for the welfare of all sentient beings, and then continued their journey to Shambhala.

Eight hours later, when Gser skyid me tog felt tired, Bkra shis suggested she ride the yak. Continuing, they eventually reached a quiet valley through which a river flowed. Bkra shis helped Gser skyid me tog dismount and then located a good site to pitch their tent. Meanwhile, Gser skyid me tog unloaded the yak and turned it free to graze.

"What do you think about this place? Do you regret running away with me? You must be tired. Rest! I'll do all the work here," Bkra shis said.

She replied, "It's very quiet and beautiful. I love being here. I don't regret coming with you. In my heart, we are inseparable. I'm a little tired, but it's my first chance to cook for you and I'll do my best."

Bkra shis was sweating after pitching the tent. "Sweetheart, I'll go collect some juniper tree bark to put on the grass under our sleeping mats," he suggested.

Gser skyid me tog said, "OK. I'll prepare noodles."

Bkra shis went to a nearby juniper forest. Noticing many ants when he peeled bark from one juniper tree, he thought, "Where will all the ants go? If I destroy this ant nest, many ants will die. As a Buddhist, I must not peel bark from juniper trees and injure the ants." He then collected some dry leaves instead and took them back to the tent.

Gser skyid me tog was cooking noodles when Bkra shis entered the tent. She exclaimed, "Why didn't you bring some bark?"

Bkra shis joked, "The juniper trees were too tall!" and then explained about the ant nests and his reluctance to make the ants



suffer. Gser skyid me tog applauded his compassion and then went outside to collect nettles to cook with the noodles.

As the nettles and noodles were bubbling in the cooking pot, Bkra shis recalled the great yogi, Rje btsun Mi la ras pa, a student of Mar pa Lo tsA ba. While Mi la ras pa was meditating in a cave he ate uncooked nettles after rubbing them between his hands.

As she served the noodles, Gser skyid me tog playfully pulled Bkra shis's hair, and asked, "What are you thinking? Are you missing home? Are the noodles OK?"

Bkra shis replied, "The nettles in the noodles made me think of Mi la ras pa. The noodles and nettles cooked together are really delicious."

She said, "I worried that you were homesick."

Bkra shis replied, "How do you like this world of two people?"

"I like it very much," she quietly answered.

A bit later, Bkra shis made a bed where he was expecting them to share one quilt. Gser skyid me tog noticed and said, "I'll give you my virginity only on the night of our wedding day."

Bkra shis was annoyed and quickly made separate sleeping places. Once in bed, Bkra shis rolled over without saying anything to Gser skyid me tog, who thought to herself, "Does love mean we must sleep together? I know he's angry with me, but he should wait until we marry." Then she recited scriptures and soon fell asleep.

At midnight, a furious storm awakened them. Gser skyid me tog called out "Bkra shis! I'm cold and afraid!"

Bkra shis told her to come to his bed and promised he would not bother her. She agreed. Bkra shis held her tightly to keep her warm. Gser skyid me tog trembled from nervousness. Thinking she was still cold, Bkra shis asked, "Are you cold?"

She replied, "I'm not cold, just nervous, because it's my first time to sleep with a man."

Bkra shis giggled and kissed her neck. After a while, Gser skyid me tog became more relaxed and held Bkra shis. She was not wearing a bra. Bkra shis tried to touch her breasts by putting his right hand under her T-shirt. Gser skyid me tog then yelled, "Bkra shis! Please keep your promise!"



Bkra shis groaned, rolled over, and went to sleep. Gser skyid me tog got up early the next morning and went out to collect yak dung so she could make a fire, heat water to wash their faces and hands, and boil tea. She also wanted to warm the leftover noodles.

Bkra shis got up and washed with warm water. He quickly finished breakfast and went to find the yak. When he returned with the yak, they packed their belongings on the yak.

Many months later they came to a large lake that marked Shambhala's border. The only obvious way to cross the lake was to swim, but neither Bkra shis nor Gser skyid me tog could swim. Gser skyid me tog sadly said to Bkra shis, "We could easily cross if there were a bridge."

Bkra shis looked at Gser skyid me tog and said, "Don't be silly!" Then the sky became cloudy, lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled. At this juncture, the yak suddenly dove into the lake, swam a short distance, and then returned to shore.

Bkra shis exclaimed, "Look at the yak! He is very faithful and I trust him. He is signaling that he will help us cross the lake. If we drown, at least all three of us will die together."

They unloaded the yak, Gser skyid me tog and Bkra shis mounted it, and it began swimming across the lake amid the thunder and lightning. The yak did its best against a high wind that created huge waves. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the yak swam faster and panted desperately. Suddenly, when a gigantic wave came near, the yak shook itself, throwing its two riders up on the shore. Meanwhile, the yak was pulled back into the lake by the receding waves. Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog gazed at the yak, tears streaming from their eyes. Gser skyid me tog said, "The yak is now part of our lives. He sacrificed himself for us."

She clasped her hands together and chanted, "oM ma Ni pad+me hUM."

Bkra shis comforted her and also recited some mantras while sitting crossed-legged.

After chanting for a while, they walked up to the top of a small mountain. From there they could see the city of Ka IA pa surrounded by snow covered mountain peaks. Both travelers joyfully knelt and prayed for the benefit of all sentient creatures. Wild animals ambled through the



town amid the pleasant twittering of various birds. There were neither cars nor tall buildings. The highest building seemed to be a magnificent monastery in the center of Ka la pa.

Gser skyid me tog said to Bkra shis, "Look! The Kingdom of Shambhala truly resembles a Tibetan place."

"Let's enter the town, and see more," suggested Bkra shis.

The two of them walked to the main street of the town. Everyone came out and greeted them with big smiles, even though they were strangers. Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog were amazed to see that practitioners of different religions lived in this beautiful town. A tall man with brown hair took them to a beautiful house. Gser skyid me tog said, "You have a really nice house."

"I will give you this house. I'm glad to meet you," the man replied generously.

Gser skyid me tog thanked him heartily. "I can't believe that people of Shambhala are so kind and generous. We are very glad to meet you, too."

A bit later, a Muslim woman wearing an open veil came and gave them a big cooking pot, apologizing for not coming earlier.

Next, a monk wearing a red robe visited bringing them a lot of food, and kindly greeted the other gift-givers. The monk and those bringing gifts were very friendly with each other. It seemed that they had known each other for a long time. The monk said, "My name is Dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan. I'm happy to see people from my home village here."

Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog shed tears and knelt before him.

Gser skyid me tog said, "We are very lucky to meet you. You are the main *bla ma* of Btsal ba Village. Everyone there is waiting for your return."

Dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan replied, "I also miss the villagers. I will return to Btsal ba to teach the Dharma after your wedding party."

After their conversation, Bkra shis went to wash vegetables in the stream near their home. Even though they practiced different religions, everyone in Shambhala was vegetarian in the belief that the



lives of animals and humans had equal value. Gser skyid me tog and the Muslim woman they had met earlier cooked the vegetables Bkra shis had washed. They then ate at one table while enjoying an interesting conversation. When Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog suggested that they hold a wedding party two days later, Dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan agreed. "The wedding party will be on Sunday, which is an auspicious day," he said.

Then they all toasted with tea because none of them drank alcohol.

After their guests left, Gser skyid me tog and Bkra shis felt tired and prepared to sleep. Gser skyid me tog said, "What happened today that you found to be the most interesting? People here are very friendly, warm-hearted, and respect each other's beliefs."

Bkra shis replied, "I also noticed that. If everyone respected each other's beliefs and cultures, then the whole world could be just like Shambhala with no conflict created by different religious beliefs."

The next day, Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog overslept. When Gser skyid me tog got up and opened the windows, she saw a lot of people waiting outside to help them prepare for the wedding party. Gser skyid me tog went to the bedroom and awakened Bkra shis. After getting dressed, Bkra shis opened the door. People gave flowers and other gifts to the couple, who were moved by such kindness.

After hours of preparing for the wedding party, Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog were exhausted and went to bed early.

The next morning, a clanging bell awakened Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog. They got up quickly and dressed. Bkra shis found the wedding ring and put it inside his robe. They then went to the monastery garden, where they saw many people wearing beautiful clothing.

After breakfast at the monastery, Bkra shis said, "Let's go inside the main temple and pray."

When they went inside, they saw an image of Jesus Christ and the crescent moon symbol of Islam. Bkra shis said, "This doesn't look like a Buddhist temple. I guess we're in the wrong place."

As they started to leave, a monk shouted and gestured. Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog turned and went in the direction the monk was pointing. They soon saw a huge image of the Buddha and made three



prostrations. The monk explained that Shambhala had only one place for all religious practitioners, who lived in harmony without conflict, hatred, ignorance, jealousy, or selfishness.

After worshipping, Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog entered the monastery garden. The leaders of the various religious groups in Shambhala were seated and did as was appropriate for a marriage in their respective religious traditions. Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog finished the wedding that morning with the help of an old man.

That afternoon, all the people of Shambhala danced hand in hand, clad in their various ethnic costumes. Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog also danced and were delighted to see so many people participating in their wedding, and happily received blessings from Shambhala's various spiritual leaders.

After everyone went home, Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog sat in the garden of their home. "What did you think of today?" Bkra shis asked.

"I'm very glad that so many people attended our wedding. If our parents had been here, I would have been even happier," replied Gser skyid me tog.

Bkra shis agreed and then they went into their house. Bkra shis took a bath while Gser skyid me tog prepared the bed. When Bkra shis finished bathing, Gser skyid me tog also bathed. Bkra shis lay under a single quilt as Gser skyid me tog dried herself and then slipped into a long, sleeveless gown. After getting into bed, Bkra shis kissed her cheeks, lips, and neck. She seemed to enjoy this, though she said nothing. Slowly, she became more passionate and returned Bkra shis's kisses. They slept very little that night.

The next morning, Gser skyid me tog pointed to blood on the sheets and proudly said, "Bkra shis, this shows my love for you."

Some years later, Bkra shis and Gser skyid me tog had two children and were a happy family. Meanwhile, Dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan returned to Btsal ba and taught the Dharma. The villagers thus all gained a better understanding of Buddhist concepts and became kinder to each other. The villagers stopped eating meat, stopped hunting animals, stopped smoking, began protecting the environment, and respected different religions and cultures. They realized that the earth



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was their home and that all people, regardless of ethnicity, were their brothers and sister.

Later, Bkra shis's and Gser skyid me tog's families regretted their conflict, exchanged *kha btags*,<sup>1</sup> and apologized to each other. Bkra shis was so moved by this that he shouted, "Love in Shambhala! Love in Shambhala!"

In the shrine room, Bkra shis twitched and muttered in his sleep shortly before his mother came and awakened him. As Bkra shis slowly woke up, he found himself murmuring, "Love in Shambhala! Love in Shambhala! ..."

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<sup>1</sup> An offering scarf presented to religious personalities, guests, and friends to show respect.



THE PRICE OF A THESIS<sup>1</sup>

Pad+ma skyabs པདྨ་སྐྱམས།

Ring... ring..." bleated a mobile phone, waking Lha mo, a student in the Tibetan Department at a well-known nationalities university. She raised her head languidly and looked around the dorm room. Her roommates were applying various cosmetics and lotions, getting ready for class. The warm sun heated her bed. She slowly turned her head to the right and gazed at a small picture of a young Chinese movie star pasted on the wall by her bed. He was wearing a shirt that exposed his skin, which seemed as white as flour smeared on a cutting board beneath a ball of dough. Nearby was a panda doll wearing a suit of red clothes that made it resemble a sleeping guard. She was suddenly overwhelmed by nostalgia.

Lha mo came from an area where Tibetan was rarely taught. Sometimes she hated herself for being Tibetan. She would soon leave school and was required to write a thesis. Because her written Tibetan was very poor, she resolved to use Chinese and spent two weeks writing a few lines in her notebook. What she wrote had many grammar mistakes and she quickly and angrily ripped the pages into pieces. She agonized about her situation and didn't know what to do until she heard the good news that a thesis could be purchased in Room 304, East Second Street. The problem was that it cost 2,000 *yuan*, which was far too expensive for her. She received only 1,000 *yuan* a month from her family, half of which was for food and the other half went to meet the cost of clothes and other expenses. She just didn't have the money to buy the thesis.

A few days later she met her friend, G.yang mo, as she was returning to her dormitory. They chatted for a bit and then G.yang mo, learning of Lha mo's difficulty, said, "I have a friend who is a great writer. I'll introduce him to you if you like. Perhaps he can help you," and then she gave his telephone number to Lha mo.

Lha mo expressed appreciation and dialed the number as

<sup>1</sup> Pad+ma skyabs. 2013. The Price of a Thesis. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 28:263-267.



soon as she returned to her dorm.

"Hello!" a man bellowed rudely.

"My friend, G.yang mo, told me about you. Would you consider helping me with my thesis?" Lha mo said.

The man's voice suddenly became much gentler, realizing that the stranger on the phone was a woman. "I'm glad to help you because we are schoolmates and we should help each other. I promise to give you a thesis this Saturday," he offered generously, soothing her anxious heart.

...

It was Saturday. The sun seemed to be annoyed by the city's noise and frenetic activity and, in retaliation, was rushing to hide behind the towering apartment and office buildings. Lha mo's mobile phone rang. She answered and a man said, "I'll come and wait for you at the school's main entrance with your thesis."

Lha mo then put on a little make-up and went to meet the writer, who examined her closely when she arrived. Tshe rdor's hair was neither long nor short. He wore faded blue jeans and had a very dark complexion. All in all, he did not make a good first impression. Tshe dor had a minor claim to fame among a small group of local Tibetan intellectuals on the basis of his poetry. He asked Lha mo, "Have you eaten? If not, let's go have dinner together."

Lha mo disliked him immediately and was reluctant to be seen with him in fear damaging rumors might reach her boyfriend, Zla ba. However, Tshe rdor had written her thesis and paying for a meal was a good way to show her appreciation. They then went to a Tibetan restaurant and ordered some vegetable dishes and a few bottles of Snow beer.

Tshe rdor said, "The thesis I wrote is titled 'A Discussion of Women's Rights'."

Flattering him Lha mo responded, "I'm sure it's excellent because you are such a famous poet at our school. Each of your poems is a masterpiece."

It was after eleven PM by the time they were ready to leave the restaurant. When Lha mo took out a one-hundred-*yuan* bill from her purse to pay for the meal, Tshe rdor grabbed her hand and said, "I'll



pay!"

Lha mo said, "I must pay to thank you for your help with my thesis. I haven't prepared any gifts for you."

Tshe rdor insisted and paid the cashier with a proud, conquering smile plastered on his face.

By now it was almost midnight. The city was still full of the hubbub of vehicles operated by busy people. The moon was clouded by the city's polluted air, preventing any enjoyment of rarely-seen moonbeams. When they emerged from the restaurant, Tshe rdor said, "We should find a hotel. The weather is so cold. What do you think?"

Lha mo shuddered when she heard this, nevertheless, she knew that her dormitory would be locked and she also understood that Tshe rdor also was aware of this. If she returned late to the dorm, the gate-guard would demand an explanation and the next day, she would have to write a report to school officials explaining where she had been and what she had done. With no real alternative, she accepted the invitation to the Peace Hotel, which was just across the road. Double and triple rooms were unavailable, so they registered for a single room.

Soon after they entered the room, Tshe rdor removed his trousers and shirt, leaving on his long underwear and t-shirt, and went to bed without comment. Meanwhile, Lha mo sat in a corner and nervously watched *Love is Awake* on a dilapidated TV set. After some minutes Tshe rdor's snores made her think he was asleep. She then softly walked to the bed and, fully clothed, lay down.

A few minutes later, she suddenly stood and shouted. Tshe rdor quickly sat up, pretending to have just awoken, and asked roughly, "What's the matter? What happened?"

Lha mo thought he had been dreaming and said nothing. But after this series of actions was repeated two more times she said angrily, "You're daydreaming, Tshe rdor. I respect you as a poet. I never thought you would behave like a dog!"

When Tshe rdor found sweet words would not charm her, he scowled and said, "Your thesis is in my hands. If you want it, give me what I want."



Lha mo felt like a small dove in a cage. Without other choices, she betrayed her lover, Zla ba. She felt that without Tshe rdor's help, she could not graduate. She also thought Zla ba would never learn of what she had done with Tshe rdor because he was practice-teaching at an elementary school in a distant village. Zla ba and Lha mo had attended the same middle school some years earlier where the seed of love had begun to grow between them.

...

Early one wintery Saturday morning, thick snow covered the city, making it fleetingly resemble a mythological heavenly palace. Only a few students were on the lanes of the nationalities university. One was a lovely girl wearing fashionable clothes and a brilliant smile. Zla ba had called Lha mo that morning and told her he was returning to the city to visit her. When she reached the train station, it was as crowded as an anthill. Zla ba was waiting for her by an exit, carrying the black schoolbag Lha mo had bought him just before he left for his teaching internship. Overcome by emotion, tears streamed down her cheeks as she embraced him. Were these tears because she had missed him, or from guilt?

Some of Zla ba's friends had heard he was back and invited him to a party that evening at eight PM. They urged him to not bring his girlfriend, and Lha mo unhappily agreed not to come. About seven students waited for him with some boxes of beer on the table in front of them in a small bar. They were all from the same home place. No women were present.

Rin chen said, "We're so glad you could come without your girlfriend. This means you understand how important friendship is."

They began drinking and bragging, all except Zla ba. Their talk centered on sex. Who had slept with whom? How many times? And so on. It seemed university life had no meaning beyond sex and liquor.

Zla ba didn't drink and so, as he pretended to listen to this useless talk, he grew increasingly impatient and bored. More time passed and his friends became drunk. Then Rin chen said, "Dear friends, lend me your ears and I'll tell you a true story about what happened between me and a girl from the far northwest last month. I



went to the Peace Hotel near our school with her. Her skin felt really special and I had a good feeling when we were intimate. It was absolutely indescribable! Then I heard a familiar voice from the adjoining room. I didn't believe it at first so decided to peep. My Buddha! We mustn't have faith in today's women."

When they asked Rin chen who she was, he drank a cup of beer and said smugly, "She was Zla ba's honey, Lha mo, but Zla ba doesn't care about that. We really shouldn't love girls - we should only concentrate on how to use them."

"Rin chen, are you serious?" Zla ba demanded several times.

Rin chen swore that he was telling the truth.

Zla ba then drank until he passed out.

The next morning Zla ba went to meet Lha mo who wore a wide smile, although her eyes darted here and there afraid that, somehow, Zla ba had learned about her unfaithfulness. Zla ba's face was pale as he came near her.

He shouted, "Bitch! What did you do when I was away?" as tears ran down his cheeks, mixing with spittle.

Lha mo hung her head and slowly said, "I'm sorry to have embarrassed you. Please forgive me. I'll explain what happened and why. I really had no choice at the time."

Zla ba didn't listen and fled with a loud cry.

...

A signal-bell calmly clanged for lunch at the nationalities university. Someone shouted, "A boy jumped from the fifth floor!" In the days that followed, many rumors spread about why he had committed suicide.



SCATTERED MEMORIES OF A MISSPENT YOUTH<sup>1</sup>

Pad ma rin chen པད་མ་རིན་ཆེན།

**M**y village is located atop a high mountain in the northwest of Reb gong County, Mtsho sngon Province. It is thirty-six kilometers from my village to the county town. We have much land, but drought over several consecutive years is common. Gradually, we became impoverished and were designated as Lnga skyong families 'households with the five protections'.<sup>2</sup> We received only a sack of flour from the government at the end of the year, which was insufficient to mitigate our distress.

During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), my grandparents had six children - my three aunts, two uncles, and Father, the eldest child. The family was very poor and feeding six children was as difficult as finding gold in the deep sea. Grandfather was required to work as a local government official and received a small salary, which was only enough for him. Because of the constraints on his time, he had little opportunity to help Grandmother. He tried to leave his job several times but failed, because he was the only local person who could do accounting. Nearly everything fell on Grandmother's shoulders who, nevertheless, never regretted marrying Grandfather.

Ten years later, everything had changed and Grandmother was free from much hard work because her children had grown up and could do most of the chores. Meanwhile, Grandfather had retired from work and spent all his time with them. They then enjoyed a happy family life, as did most other local families.

Father graduated from school and became a primary school teacher when he was eighteen. He received a small salary that helped

<sup>1</sup> Pad ma rin chen. 2013. Scattered Memories of a Misspent Youth. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 28:269-280.

<sup>2</sup> A designation for assistance provided to people/households without income, old people without family members to care for them, and people unable to work. The "five protections" are a stipend, clothes, health insurance, housing, and funeral expenses.



the family. He was gentle, benevolent, and his mind was sharp, which made everything easy for him to learn. Villagers liked and respected him.

My parents met in Mother's village, fell in love, and married. Mother never attended school because she needed to care for her sisters. Mother worked very hard and did everything so well that everyone admired her.

...

I was born in Father's home on 23 October 1987, clutching something in my left hand. My birth brought happiness to my family. Grandfather was very fond of me and did not allow others to touch me in fear I would be contaminated and fall ill. Grandfather thought that I was lucky and would be a good person because my birthday is a special day - Bcu pa'i lnga mchod, the anniversary of Tsong kha ba's death. My grandparents often took me to meet *bla ma* and visit monasteries on this day.

When I was three years old, I became seriously ill, which worried my family. Everything possible was done for me, but I became even sicker. I couldn't sleep at all. My grandparents stayed with me constantly and sang lullabies, hoping I would fall asleep. Meanwhile, my relatives hoped that I would die quickly, thus liberating my soul and my family from worry.

One day, Grandfather heard about a famous *sgom pa* 'meditator' who meditated in a secret cave and performed remarkably accurate divinations. My grandparents carried me to where the *sgom pa* lived, respectfully put their palms together under their bowed heads, and told my story.

When they finished, the *sgom pa* divined with his old beads, gave me a thick amulet, and said I should go on pilgrimage. My grandparents then carried me as they circumambulated monasteries and high mountains, burning incense, and praying that I would be liberated from sickness. Eventually, I did recover.

...

When I was seven, my parents sent me to study at the primary school located in the upper part of our village. It had only four classrooms plus teachers' quarters. It was built of mud-bricks and not



structurally sound. Students from different grades shared one classroom. My class had five students who were older and stronger than me. Though they beat and bullied me, I still wanted to play with them, because they often played fun games. Our teachers were busy gambling and spent little time with the students. When I was in grade three, I had learned nothing except bad habits. Villagers chose some people to report the situation to relevant leaders, who did nothing.

Roads and transport to my village were terrible, and it was far from the city, so none of the teachers wanted to be there. Being at our school was so undesirable that, when a class in another township scored the worst on township-wide exams, the teacher was punished by being assigned to our school. There was no class schedule. Teachers did whatever they liked. These factors led most students to drop out of school.

For these reasons, Father sent me to another school, where I had problems keeping up with my new classmates. I was very depressed, did not want to study, and thought that I had the worst karma of any boy in the world. Fortunately, with the teachers' encouragement and help from my classmates, I didn't drop out. Gradually, I became a good student.

...

I was in grade six in primary school, and busily preparing for the final examination that would determine the middle school we would attend. School rules were strict and I was challenged by life at school, and by other students. Relationships between students often soured and some classmates didn't speak to each other. I studied for many hours each day and was confident that I would succeed in the examination. Some students never studied seriously, but instead, spent most of their time playing. During caterpillar fungus collecting season, a few students were ordered to leave school to collect this valuable medicinal substance. Examination results varied from student to student, giving students different opportunities. The top students were chosen by the best middle school and received awards and praise, while other students had to repeat grade six and retake the examination.

Fortunately, I passed the exam. The first day I arrived at my



new middle school I was very surprised by the school environment and conditions. The school gate was large and wide and had Tibetan features. Two stone lions by the school gated added a sense of grandeur. Although the class buildings and office buildings were not as tall as I had imagined, everything was clean and tidy. Trees surrounding the school gave a nice green feeling. I liked the school immediately and very happily registered. Teachers kindly welcomed new students and introduced the school's history. Older students helped new students take their belongings to the dormitory rooms. It was totally different from my primary school.

...

Teachers told the new students that we would meet at seven-thirty PM and added that all new students must attend to better understand school regulations. After dinner, I directly went to a classroom at around six PM and sat in the back where I felt very lonely. I started imagining the things I wanted while recalling my happy life at home. I was homesick and unhappy. My new classmates trickled in one by one, speaking loudly and playing. They seemed happy, but their noise interrupted my reverie. I was very upset but dared not tell them to stop, because we didn't know each other. I sat in my chair quietly, missing my family and my friends even more. Tears involuntarily filled my eyes. Feeling deeply humiliated and worried that my classmates would see me, I put my head on the table, wiped away my tears with my left hand, and murmured, "Father, Mother," again and again, which brought me some comfort.

Students were from different villages, townships, and counties. I looked at each of them carefully. Some were obviously older than me, and some seemed very young. Most students were boys. At seven-thirty PM, a teacher holding a packet of documents hurried into the classroom. He was tall, very thin, wore a big pair of glasses, and was dressed in a clean suit. He resembled what I imagined a professor to be. We stood up and chorused, "Good evening, Teacher!"

He stood on the platform, told us to sit, and then introduced himself. He explained school discipline, class rules, and our schedule clearly and seriously. When he finished, he asked us to introduce



ourselves. We then went to the platform in turn and introduced ourselves. As I nervously listened to others I was worried as I had no idea of what to say. Some students were so shy that they couldn't keep their heads up, while others were brave and joyful. When it was my turn, I stood on to the platform as my face blushed and my legs shook. I couldn't get my voice to come out of my throat and sweat poured from my face. I whispered my name and then rushed back to my seat. I felt my chair was unsteady as I heard classmates whispering deprecating remarks about my pathetic presentation.

We gradually got to know each other and our relationships improved. We had more conversations and often joked. We would say how beautiful our own home area was, which sometimes led to fighting.

A few boys started finding girlfriends. Most boys were naive and had no experience with romance, though they were happy if they did get a girlfriend. Some failed at finding girlfriends and looked sad and embarrassed. Every night, we could see couples tightly embracing in dark places, murmuring secrets. Some boys began drinking beer and doing other stupid things.

Rdo rje and I were close friends and deskmates. We were often together and shared everything. He was a local boy from a rich family. He bought delicious snacks and drinks every morning. I had never seen some of those snacks and drinks before. He generously gave me half of whatever he bought. I was happy with him and did whatever he asked. I often praised him to my parents and friends. My parents liked him and thanked him for helping me.

Middle school life was very different from life in primary school. There were many subjects to learn, which was very challenging. Students competed to see who could get up the earliest and study the hardest. I lay in my warm bed with Rdo rje and almost forgot that I was a student. I never worried about preparing for my lessons. I followed Rdo rje and his friends to dance halls. My companions had a lot of money and I started to drink and smoke, too. I was their servant and helped them buy beer and other things. In return, they gave me whatever I asked for. I felt I was lucky to spend most of my time with them.



Every night we noisily returned to our dormitory rooms very late, disturbing our roommates, who didn't like Rdo rje and me, but who dared not report us to the teachers, because Rdo rje's parents were important people. I often dozed before our classes finished.

...

One hot summer afternoon, Rdo rje and I were bored in math class. I put my head on my desk and tried to sleep, but couldn't. Then we decided to leave. I had two *yuan* for the bus fee to take me home that weekend. We had already spent Rdo rje's money the day before at an internet bar. I used the rest of my money to buy five cigarettes in the school shop. We first planned to go swimming but, when we reached the Dgu chu, we saw some naked girls swimming. They didn't see us as Rdo rje and I peeked at them lustfully. Suddenly, strong rough hands grabbed my ears. I turned and saw an older woman. She hit me hard, knocking me to the ground. I was angry because Rdo rje seemed to have disappeared. At first, I thought he'd seen the woman and escaped without warning me, but then I saw him. He seemed to have been beaten more seriously than me. We cursed the woman, saying we hoped she would soon die.

A few minutes later, Rdo rje took me to his home, which was near the school. The door was locked when we arrived and he had no key so he climbed up the courtyard wall and jumped inside, while I remained on guard outside to warn him if any of his family members came. When he returned, he gave me an expensive pack of cigarettes and showed me 200 RMB in his pocket. I was shocked because I had never seen so much money before. We headed to the dance halls and spent all the money there in the next few hours.

...

I spent a year having a good time with Rdo rje and his friends, even though bad activities and bad thoughts contaminated me. I became another person. Only Rdo rje wanted to be my friend. I put my head up arrogantly, confident I was a lucky man.

When the second semester began, the school leader organized a meeting with parents. I was afraid my family would learn my secrets and tried to escape the meeting. I talked to several of my teachers in their offices and lied about Father's inability to attend the



meeting, telling them that my home was far from school, transportation was inconvenient, and so on.

My head teacher didn't believe me, because I had failed almost all of my subjects. He said that whoever's parents did not attend the meeting would be expelled. I lost hope and gloomily waited, imagining what would happen. I very worried about Father's bad temper. Finally, I phoned Father and told him that he needed to attend a meeting. He was happy with such news and eager to come. As I had changed all my marks he had no idea how poorly I was really performing. All my family members thought I was a good student and were proud of me.

Father arrived at school early in the morning on the day of the meeting, bringing bread and fruit. I took Father to my dormitory room where we waited for the meeting to begin. At ten AM, parents gathered and sat by their child's desk in the classroom. My teacher began by talking about the class situation. He then complimented the best students, announced whose scores were the highest, and handed out awards. The teacher also read some of the bad students' names and explained what they had done and expressed the hope that their family would educate them. I fearfully looked at Father's increasingly red, angry face. A few minutes later, Father left the classroom and then zoomed through the school's big gate on his motorcycle without a word to me. I was disappointed with myself and vowed I would start over and do my best.

...

I went home during the winter holiday. I never reviewed my subjects and did nothing to help my family. My parents never talked about my study because they knew the results. Except for playing basketball, I had nothing to do. In fact, I thought I shouldn't do anything to help my family because I was a student. I spent much of the daytime playing basketball and every night I went to the small village shop where many people gathered after supper. Children came with their fathers, who often gambled. Young people my age drank beer and talked about their romantic adventures. I didn't like talking about my secrets, but still, I somehow couldn't control myself from revealing all of them. Our conversations were enormously exciting and filled the



small shop with noise. Meanwhile, the gamblers quivered and grimaced, waiting for their chance to win, while their children stood behind them, nervously watching, each praying their own father would be successful.

...

One night, I was frightened by storm winds, which blew the whole night stopping only the next morning. Fortunately, the accumulated paper and plastic garbage had disappeared from every corner, making our village as clean as my school. The sun rose from above Gnyan chen Mountain that morning, pouring bright sunshine onto the ground, warming everyone it touched. I walked straight to the front of our temple gate, looking for friends. This was where we gathered every morning. I took a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply. I then switched on my cell phone, played some music, and checked the outgoing calls I had drunkenly dialed the previous night. Wondering what I had said, I felt intense regret and humiliation. My friend had introduced me to a pretty girl who was easy to communicate with. I intended to call her and thought about what I should say.

Meanwhile, Uncle Tshe b+ha arrived, murmuring scriptures as he began circumambulating the temple. After each round, he touched his head to the temple gate, closed his eyes, and prayed. I saw from his face that he was unhappy. Suddenly, he gave me a big smile and sat in front of me. I took a cigarette from my pocket and respectfully offered it to him. He took out his lighter and asked me about my school and study. I gave a simple response and gazed at him, hoping he would tell me about our village history. He knew a lot about my village because he was the oldest person there. All the villagers respected as him as much as a *bla ma*. He was wise and had resolved countless problems in my village.

Uncle Tshe b+ha told me how important school was, and said that society was not as simple as many imagined. He added that life never went as you expected. I paid little attention. I was much more interested in his romantic adventures, which I had heard about from his nephew, who was also my best friend. Finally, he took a deep breath and absent-mindedly said, "What an evil boy G.yang skyabs is..."



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The account below is partly what Uncle Tshe b+ha told me and what most villagers knew about G.yang skyabs:

G.yang skyabs's father was in prison and would have to stay there for two more years before he could be released. He had illegally sold guns and had been sentenced to six years. His elder brother had become a monk when he was seven and did very well at his studies in his monastery. Every year during the *ma Ni* festival, he returned home to visit his family members. During his most recent visit, he had discovered his family's miserable situation, felt unbearable anguish, and then had returned to his monastery.

His Uncle Rdo rje encouraged him to become a layman and help his mother. Realizing his mother's life was as difficult as that of a slave, he consulted a *bla ma* and finally resolved to become a layman. His grandmother was as angry as a mad elephant when she heard this and announced that if he became a layman, she would commit suicide.

The grandmother held a high position in their family. She never liked losing anything that belonged to her and wanted to keep everything, even old, useless things. Her children and relatives discussed creating merit for her next life and then invited a high *bla ma* and monks to read scriptures. Meanwhile, they prepared food and milk tea for villagers and other guests. The grandmother had even kept a tea brick from her wedding during the Cultural Revolution and thought this was the time to use her bridal tea, stored in a locked wooden box, to demonstrate her generosity. Unfortunately, she discovered it had turned to dust.

The family understood the grandmother's insistence on the older son remaining a monk so hopefully waited for the second son, who had roamed aimlessly in Lha sa for three years. His mother often heard of his bad behavior from others who had returned from pilgrimage to Lha sa.

One day, G.yang skyabs's mother was delighted to hear that her son was returning and impatiently waited, telling everyone that he would soon be home. G.yang skyabs' relatives and friends gathered at his home to help clean it. His mother couldn't concentrate on work because she imagined her son had become as important as the greatest man in the local community. She smiled graciously at everyone and prepared



nice food.

The grandmother said nothing as she sat on the warm bed, constantly spinning her prayer wheel. She took deep breaths and gazed at the gate, expectation etched on her wrinkled face. Eventually, G.yang skyabs arrived, reeking of alcohol. Only his mother recognized him. He was taller than before, skinny, and his face had numerous scars. He murmured unclear, simple auspicious words to everyone in the local dialect mixed with the Lha sa dialect. Ignoring the local taboo on drinking in front of elders, he disrespectfully took two bottles of beer from his bag and started drinking alone.

His grandmother was so disappointed and humiliated by his behavior that she recited *ma Ni* more quickly than usual, and then left for her youngest son's home. G.yang skyabs continued drinking beer and speaking in the Lha sa dialect. Everyone listened carefully but understood little of what he said. No one responded. He got drunk and passed out within two hours. The guests then left. His mother's heart became as cold as ice, but she still regarded him as her son.

G.yang skyabs's return was big news in the village and everyone excitedly talked about him. Even the elders paused while chanting scriptures and commented on G.yang skyabs's return.

After a week, G.yang skyabs became a regular at the small village shop, drinking the days and nights away. Young men surrounded him and listened to his exciting stories. We all admired his boastful, imaginative accounts of his exploits and, somehow, we trusted what he said. His stories astounded us and we scrambled to pay for his beer. Meanwhile, G.yang skyabs's life was happy for it was as though he were at a never-ending feast. Who knew what secrets he was hiding?

His mother lived in grief and mourning after his return. Though she was terribly disappointed with her son's behavior, she still tried to imagine a bright future for G.yang skyabs. This seemed increasingly hopeless because he never listened to her. On the contrary, he forced her to give him money and grain. He wandered everywhere, staying in expensive hotels and eating expensive food when he had money, which stayed in his hand only as long as it takes paper to burn. His mind was focused on money and he was never calm without a little cash in his pocket.



One dark night, he climbed the courtyard wall belonging to Aunt Bde skyid, who was nearly seventy years old. It was rumored that her father had been rich and that she had married a rich man at her father's command when she was seventeen. Her husband had died during the chaotic days of new China. Unfortunately, most of Aunt Bde skyid's father's life was spent in prison where he starved to death. The government searched for, but never found, his treasures. After becoming a widow, Aunt Bde skyid lived alone and never remarried. Her life became a living Hell. None of her relatives helped her much and many people abused her. However, as she got older and her relatives imagined that she would soon die, they began struggling to care for her, thinking she had kept her father's treasures that they yearned to inherit.

After jumping over Aunt Bde skyid's courtyard wall, G.yang skyabs rushed into her home, grabbed her by the neck, and demanded that she give him her secret jewels. She was shocked, screamed, and then she gave him the small amount of cash that she had. Awakened by her shrieks, her neighbors rushed in and saw a tall man wearing black clothes and holding a dagger, standing behind Aunt Bde skyid. As he tried to escape, they caught him and discovered his identity.

The next morning, Aunt Bde skyid's relatives planned to take him to the local police station and lodge a formal complaint. Feeling sympathy for his poor mother, who came several times to apologize, Aunt Bde skyid pardoned him. G.yang skyabs's relatives thought imprisonment was the best way for him to change, but his mother didn't agree.

G.yang skyabs left and then returned with a friend a month later, bringing vegetables for his mother, which pleasantly surprised her. He told his mother that he would find a job the next day. His mother was doubtful but happily cooked nice food for him and his friend. G.yang skyabs and his friend went to the village shop after dinner. His mother prepared some clothes for him and then went to bed.


The next morning, Uncle Tshe ring shouted and banged on the door. G.yang skyabs's mother felt like somebody had grabbed her heart and was squeezing it. She could hardly breathe. Uncle Tshe ring's face grew as white as a corpse's as he told how G.yang skyabs had stolen Uncle Rdo rje's entire harvest of caterpillar fungus for that year.

G.yang skyabs's mother fainted.



CONFLICT<sup>1</sup>

Pad ma rin chen པད་མ་རིན་ཆེན།

 myes bya khyung, dignified and magnificent, towers among its shorter peers behind the capital city of Reb gong. Frequently, Heaven seems to scatter white flowers on the mountain peak, making it splendidly picturesque. The mid-slopes of the mountain were once covered with dense forest where countless animals thrived. Locals dared not go there alone or without weapons, in fear of attack from wild animals. However, they often did go in small groups, as the forest was the main source of fuel. At the foot of the mountain, an immense grassland full of valuable herbs and diverse flowers emits an overpowering fragrance. Babbling brooks flow from springs on the grassland and quench the thirst of both people and livestock.

From their ancestors, the people of Reb gong had inherited the belief that the mountain is a deity called A myes bya khyung, who has the most exalted position among local deities in Reb gong. People respectfully burn juniper and offer sweet food to this deity before they themselves eat anything. They also express their innermost feelings to the deity and ask for whatever they want. Some religious devotees read scriptures in meditation caves on this mountain.

Since early times, generations of smiling nomads had happily shared this pastureland, herding together and helping one another. Every year, they all gathered to celebrate various sacred rituals. Marriage relationships between the tribes were also established. Consequently, other communities admired them and hoped their life would one day be as pleasant. In this way, Blon che Village was established, its reputation grew, and it became known throughout Reb gong.

Years passed swiftly and social transformations occurred one after another. The number of nomads increased. Household requirements increased and greed ended that once happy life.

<sup>1</sup> Pad ma rin chen. 2013. Conflict. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 28:281-295.



Conflict began. The community divided into Blon che bde chen and Blon che rga ra communities. The conflict between these two communities led to killings. The beautiful grassland gradually became a bloody battlefield where ruthless conflicts raged. Revenge and unspeakable malice led to twenty years of conflict and more than fifty deaths. Gradually, each tribe realized that conflict brought nothing but more revenge. People yearned for peace but dared not speak their thoughts because of memories of the martyrs who had died protecting their territory. The flames of the martyrs' parents' and siblings' raging hate burned as high as Bya khyung Mountain. The only recourse they saw was more revenge.

Fortunately, high *bla ma* and various neighboring tribal chieftains ended the conflicts and brought a peaceful life and relief from the immeasurable sorrow and misery. However, though the conflicts ceased, the community had lost its previous unity. Unbearable enmity had pierced each villager's heart and, when they recalled the battles and martyrs, the only thing on their mind was revenge.

Time rushed on like the Dgu chu. Life on the grassland grew more complex. Laughter was heard as rarely as flowers were seen growing in the sky. Meanwhile, the once-sincere villagers became increasingly cunning. No one trusted anyone, not even their own relatives. Leaders cared only about their own benefit and worked for their own interest. The government divided the grassland between families and, predictably, government and local leaders colluded and allotted pastures according to the bribes they received. It was unfair, because the best pastures were then controlled by the well-connected families and their relatives, while high-altitude and barren lands were given to poor families. Some of the latter families settled together and created Si rigs Village, where the climate was cold, and sparse grass supported only a few head of livestock. When the calamity of harsh weather repeated itself several years in a row, and most of the livestock died, meeting basic needs for food and clothing became problematic. Life was unfair and Si rigs villagers became as poor as beggars. Those who lived there received little respect. Instead, they were the subject of frequent disdain and humiliation.



Time amid such difficulties seemed to pass as slowly as a tortoise climbing a Himalayan mountain. People experienced unbearable conditions, and the only thing they yearned for was a quick death.

Unbelievably, it eventually turned out that Si rigs Village was situated on a veritable gold mine, as their barren lands were ideal grounds for caterpillar fungus, which thrives at high altitude. It is a worm, with a red horn and yellow body that becomes infected with a fungus and then dies. It grows from May to June. The biggest is as big as a duck's webbed foot, and the smallest is as small as a chicken claw.

Over time, more and more businessmen came to Si rigs to collect this precious substance, and prices increased. Caterpillar fungus income was attractive and the number of collectors grew ever larger, which renewed conflict on the grassland. Avaricious tribes and other communities wanted the best places for themselves, which led to various pretexts to invade others' lands.

Si rigs villagers were brave and their unity was as strong as stone. Although Blon che bde chen and Blon che rga ra villages cooperated to fight for Si rigs Village, they failed to snatch the land where caterpillar fungus grew.

More years passed, and a new battle started between Si rigs and Sha sbrang villages. Sha sbrang, an agro-pastoral community near Reb gong City,<sup>1</sup> created the excuse that, long ago, ancestors of its current residents had herded in the caterpillar fungus area. Sha sbrang argued that as the land had once belonged to them, they had claim to it. Thus, a battle began and continued for seven years. For Si rigs Village, it was a difficult war because its adversary was rich and had a population more than twice their own. Furthermore, Sha sbrang had many weapons. During the seven-year battle, Sha sbrang Village lost five men and much wealth but gained much land. Si rigs village lost two men and their living conditions worsened. Si rigs villagers, knowing that the battle could not be won, surrendered.

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<sup>1</sup> Most Sha sbrang residents herd and farm. A minority rely exclusively on agriculture. Sha sbrang Village is at the foot of a mountain and has fertile fields. The grasslands on the mountain are used for grazing.



Afterward, they herded elsewhere and enjoyed a more peaceful life.

Sha sbrang villagers collected caterpillar fungus and made plans for getting more land. Meanwhile, another avaricious village appeared: Chu ma, which was wealthier than Sha sbrang Village and had a population three times larger than Sha sbrang.

Chu ma Village was disciplined in battle. Village men aged seventeen and older were required to join its militia. Every soldier received a new gun and sufficient bullets before the time of the battle. The militia was divided into groups. Within each group, a commander was chosen to be responsible for his soldiers' safety. The chieftain and commanders invited soldiers who were skilled marksmen to teach Chu ma's militia how to use the guns and protect themselves during battle. After practice, the villagers were confident about the upcoming battle. Fearless youths often tried to start trouble with anyone from Sha sbrang Village. Once, some drunk men caught a Sha sbrang villager on the road as he was returning home, ruthlessly beat him, stripped him naked, and then released him. Chu ma Village chieftains ignored this behavior and did not scold the young men. It seemed that they were challenging Sha sbrang Village. Meanwhile, Sha sbrang villagers did the same, cruelly beating Chu ma villagers and preparing their own weapons.

When the fighting began in earnest, all those who had prepared participated fearlessly, first using slingshots. During the battle, each village had casualties. As their hatred deepened, they began using guns. Meanwhile, a high *bla ma* and locally well-known wise men traveled to each village, teaching that war brought only suffering and an endless cycle of revenge. They tried their best to stop the fighting, hoping for peace between Chu ma and Sha sbrang communities.

They failed.

The two villages fought for about ten years. Each village suffered more than five deaths. The government then, abruptly, divided the caterpillar fungus land into two parts. The largest was the lower part, which it gave Sha sbrang Village. The other section was given to Chu ma Village. Everyone knew that the prefecture governor had accepted a large amount of money from Sha sbrang Village for



assistance during the war, and also that he needed to resolve problems in Reb gong in order to be promoted. After the division of land, the local governor reported that there were no longer any conflicts and boasted that people were now living in peace and joy. He was rewarded and complimented by provincial leaders, promoted, and reassigned to another prefecture.

On the surface, the conflict had been resolved by the government's division of land. In reality, the battle continued, especially during the caterpillar fungus collection season. Sha sbrang Village had the largest, most valuable location and hired additional fungus collectors because they themselves could not cover the entire area. Chu ma Village had a larger population but owned only a small area of land. Government interference had inflicted much pain on Chu ma villagers.

When I was seven, most of my township's residents went to 'Bru gu chung to collect caterpillar fungus for free because we were invited by Sha sbrang Village. It was a good chance for us to make money. They hoped that we could help mediate if there was a conflict between Chu ma and Sha sbrang.

Whenever caterpillar fungus season came, Mother left my siblings and me in my maternal grandmother's home and went to collect the precious herb. Father was busy with his work at school and did not have enough time to take care of us. During the caterpillar fungus season, I was bored and missed Mother every second. My relatives cared for me and were kind to me, but I did not experience the comfortable feeling that I had whenever Mother was with me. I was full of sadness and became thinner. It was just like I was living in Hell. I often counted how many days had passed in Mother's absence. I waited for Mother to return, and felt the passing time was as long as a dozen years.

I dreamed of digging caterpillar fungus because Mother had promised to take me with her. I incessantly asked her when we would set out and told my friends that I would go. I asked my friends how to collect caterpillar fungus because they were more experienced than me. Every year their parents took them out of school to go with them to collect caterpillar fungus. Children have keen eyesight and can find



the fungus more easily than elders. I was often puzzled why my parents did not take me to help them make money and scolded them when my friends went off to collect. I did not understand my parents' decision until I was in middle school.

That year, the villagers decided to start off on the twenty-fifth day of the fourth lunar month. Father helped Mother gather what we would need and pack it into big sacks. Sister Tshe mo mkhar went to the courtyard to feed our mules grass and beans to strengthen them for the coming trek. I rushed out to see what other people were doing and hurried back inside to report their activities to my parents. Father laughed and continued with his work. Mother cooked a wonderful dinner for us, but I was too excited to eat very much. At first that night, I could not sleep, but finally, I found rest.

What seemed only a few moments later, Mother shook my shoulder to wake me. It was still dark outside, but I did not complain. I immediately got up and went to wash my face. Meanwhile, my parents put our gear on the mules and tied it tightly with ropes. After a simple breakfast, we set out with my relatives.

Father escorted us to the border of the village and told me what I should and shouldn't do. I promised, "I'll obey Mother, or else I'm not your son," and watched satisfaction cross Father's face. He smiled as he kissed me, and then returned home. Holding their mules' reins, villagers briskly walked in single file. I followed Mother and my sisters and brothers as well as I could. When dawn broke, we had already gone halfway. The weather was bad. The chilly wind stung my face. I was extremely tired and hungry, but I dared not mention it to Mother as my friends walked on without complaint. I plodded onward without relief. Eventually, we had lunch and rested for an hour. I drank a cup of water and, exhausted, lay on the ground to rest.

Curiously, I was on a mule wrapped in Mother's robe when I awoke. I felt comfortable because my tiredness had vanished. Snow was falling fiercely, covering the ground so that everything was white. It was beautiful scenery, but the villagers were bemoaning the bad weather and cursing the heavens. I dismounted when we reached the base of a mountain. Sister gave me a piece of dry bread which I



nibbled on while climbing the mountain with a walking stick. Mother and my brothers watched the mules attentively as they placed their feet on the slippery path.

We moved on reaching our destination at around midday. We unloaded the mules and put our belongings on big stones because the ground was wet. I shivered where I sat on a stone, but felt glad we had reached our destination. Mother and Brother located a piece of level ground for our tent. While we pitched the tent, my sisters, Tshe mo mkhar and 'Brug mo, collected firewood in a nearby forest.

Brother Snying dkar rgyal helped Mother store our gear inside the tent and made two beds from stones and dried grass. I was so hungry I could barely stand. I asked Mother for some food. There was only dry bread, which I had no appetite to eat, so I took a short nap. It was night when I awoke, and my stomach was rumbling from hunger. The odor of cooking food attracted me and I wanted it more than gold. I rubbed my eyes and asked when we would eat.

Mother gave me a sweet smile and asked me where I wanted to have supper.

I said I wanted to eat in my warm bed. I didn't want to get up because the tent wasn't as warm as home. I had never had such a delicious supper before. I ate in a rush while gazing at the pot. Mother and my brother and sisters giggled and teased that I shouldn't eat the pot. I smiled and continued eating.

After I was full I went for a walk with Brother. Our neighbors had lit what seemed like thousands of candles. Some households were also using solar power. It was a beautiful scene, just like stars had fallen on the ground. A bright, clear moon was rising over the mountain. I could see everywhere without a flashlight. Brother took a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, inhaled deeply, and looked around. I was astonished and asked what he was looking for. He ignored my questions and, instead, led me back to the tent to sleep. Mother and my sisters were preparing for bed. I couldn't sleep because of our neighbors' loud conversations about when the snow would melt and where fungus grew.

The next day was lovely; the sunshine was bright, the sky was blue, and there was not even a whisper of wind. People were busy re-



arranging their tent's position, and bed and hearth locations. Mother spread out our clothes to dry. I was the only person who had nothing to do. I asked Mother if I could go play with my friends. She agreed but told me to be careful, because the strong light from the snow could injure my eyes. She took a pair of dark sunglasses from a bag and gave them to me. I rushed to my friends' tents and called them to come out. We played and made snowmen near the tents. While we were playing, I noticed some people wearing uniforms carrying a lot of gear. It was the police.

Taking a few young men, the Sha sbrang Village chief went to greet them. They carried all the policemen's gear above our position and helped them pitch their tents. I happily thanked the mountain deity and government for sending the policemen. I hurried to our tent and shared this news with my family. They surprised me by being displeased. I was confused and wondered if there was something wrong with what I had reported. I liked policemen and even dreamed of being one myself. I thought policemen were heroes because they spent their lives serving others, and protecting society from criminals. I hoped the policemen would help solve problems if something bad were to happen.

After a few days of regular bright sunshine, the snow melted and created small rivulets in every nook and cranny. People formed small groups with their relatives and friends and discussed where to go first because caterpillar fungus grows at different times in different places. It appears earlier at lower elevations. Those acquainted with this place didn't want to share their experience with others and often pretended to be busy with chores in their tent as an excuse to avoid chatting.

Mother hurriedly came inside our tent wearing a big smile. She whispered that Aunt Tshe ring mtsho had promised to take us with her. Aunt had been hunting fungus for several years in a row in this place and had a good experience. Mother warned us that this was a big secret and also a good opportunity for us to collect more than others. Mother cooked dinner at five PM and we went to bed early. I woke up at midnight, annoyed by our noisy neighbors. Wondering where the noise was coming from, I realized it was coming from the



policemen's tents. I was frightened by this realization because I thought the policemen must have caught some troublemakers who were drinking and bothering the people who were sleeping. Wrapping my head in my quilt I tried to sleep, but scary ghost stories came to mind. Fortunately, the noise continued outside. Now, in my frightened state, it had become a good companion because I knew others were near. Eventually, I fell asleep.

Mother pulled my quilt away, waking me. I raised my head and looked around. Everybody else was up. Although I was still sleepy, I got up because it was my first day to collect caterpillar fungus. I quickly dressed and washed my face. Then we ate breakfast. While I slowly chewed, I imagined that I had collected a lot of fungus and gotten a reward from Mother. Then, Brother suddenly shouted at me, "Hey! Time to get ready! Let's go!"

I took my face-mask and gloves from a faded bag and asked Mother where my spade was. Meanwhile, Aunt Tshe ring mtsho appeared, and we followed her.

The collectors resembled ants streaming in different directions after a naughty boy has disturbed their anthill with a stick. Some people seemed unsure of where to go and stood near their tents, watching others. We started searching for the caterpillar fungus on a small flat area near the tents. Suddenly Brother Snying dkar rgyal shouted, announcing that he had "broken his egg." Diggers describe the first caterpillar fungus each day as an egg. People don't ask you if you found a fungus, but if you broke your egg. Most people shout when they find a fungus. I rushed to Brother and looked at the caterpillar fungus. It was different from what I had imagined. The head was red mixed with dark brown. Only the short head was visible on the surface on the ground, and that was barely visible. Brother pushed his spade into the earth near the caterpillar fungus and easily pulled it up.

Brother's good luck made me nervous because I was competing with my family members. I calmed myself and concentrated on looking for caterpillar fungus. A bit later, I proudly broke my egg. Mother praised me and promised to buy snacks for me. I continued happily collecting caterpillar fungus and by the end of the



day had collected forty-one.

People were as avaricious as hungry wolves and barely rested. They collected day after day. We collected different amounts each day. Some days we found many and on other days it was difficult to find even one. Happily, there was no conflict between Sha sbrang and Chu ma villages throughout those fifteen days. People thanked the territorial deities for protecting us.

The number of caterpillar fungus was dwindling and people were hoping for a big rain to nourish the earth. Chu ma and Sha sbrang youth gathered and wandered everywhere. Sometimes they scuffled when they encountered each other. The policemen carelessly stayed in their tents, gambling and drinking beer. We could hear their constant laughter.

One lovely morning I followed Brother far from our tent to collect fungus. The only creatures near us were sheep and yaks. Brother led me up a small hill. My eyes involuntarily went in the direction of our home in the distance. Brother scolded me several times, but I couldn't stop looking. I recalled when I was at home, playing with my friends. I felt homesick and tears flowed from my eyes. Meanwhile, Brother came and sat in front of me. I thought Brother would scold me but he didn't. I was astonished and sat silently. He took a cigarette from his left pocket, lit it, stretched his right hand out, stroked my head, smiled, and said, "I'm also terribly homesick, just like you. I want to go home immediately, but it's not the right time. We must remember why everyone is working so hard. If we don't seize this chance, we'll get very little, and then we won't have a happy life."

I understood. His encouragement moved me, and I vowed to work hard. Meanwhile, an old woman emerged near the hill. She had a stick in her right hand and prayer beads in her left. Murmuring a mantra, she carried a baby on her back. Her hair was as white as snow and her face as wrinkled as a tortoise's. She must have been at least sixty years old. Sitting down beside us she asked where we were from. Her speech was lovely and elegant.

It was almost lunchtime. She took a bottle of milk tea from her bag and handed it to me. I shared a piece of dry bread with her. I



learned that she was from Sha sbrang Village and that her name was Aunt Mgon po mtsho.

When I asked about the conflict between Sha sbrang and Chu ma, her face changed immediately. She then told Brother and me her story:

My husband died during the conflict between our village and Si rigs when I was twenty-seven years old. My family was poor. I had three sons. They were too young to help me, and so everything fell on my shoulders. My life was as difficult as a beggar's. Time passed so slowly for me and the children. People despised me and my relatives. I swallowed my misery and solved my problems as best I could by myself. My mother endlessly encouraged me to remarry but I refused. My hope was my children.

Eventually, the children grew up and everything changed. My eldest son married a woman who is benevolent, lovely, and hardworking. I was then free from much hard work and largely liberated from suffering. After a year, my daughter-in-law gave birth to a son, bringing happiness and good fortune to my family. We enjoyed a happy life.

Three years passed swiftly and people were crazy about making money. The conflict over grassland resumed, and many violent battles ensued. All village males above the age of fifteen joined the militia and went to fight. Others stayed at home busy with various rituals, reading scriptures, and beseeching the mountain deities to protect us. Mothers nervously and selfishly prayed for their sons' safety, impatiently waiting for their return.

The conflict raged for five months. One day when I was in the *ma Ni* room, I saw a group of men near the edge of the mountain. When the men drew near, my body involuntarily trembled and my mind couldn't focus. I looked among the men, searching for my son. He was not there. Then when I saw some young men carrying someone on their back my heart ached as though it had been stabbed with a dagger. I knew something terrible had happened. I began hoping those men would never arrive. Finally, silently, they reached the *ma Ni* room with the corpse.

The chieftain and some young men carried the corpse into the caretaker's room. I dared not look for my son. Tears flowed down my



cheeks and plopped onto the ground. Then the chieftain came and told me to come to the caretaker's room. I pushed him away exclaiming, "Why are you asking me to do this? Where is my son?" and then I fainted.

That afternoon I woke up in my bed. My mother and sisters were around me. I wept and shouted. I told Mother it was all a dream, that it wasn't real. They were weeping, too. Villagers invited *bla ma* and monks to read scriptures, and brought what was needed for the funeral rituals. I didn't want to see anyone in my home, not even relatives. I blamed my evil luck on the sins I must have committed in my former life. I asked why I had come to this world.

A few months passed but I still couldn't accept the reality. My life was full of suffering. I considered suicide, but I couldn't do it when I saw my other sons and grandson.

Aunt Mgon po mtsho's tears flowed down her face. I sobbed, too. Though I sympathized, I was too embarrassed to say anything to console her. After a moment, Aunt Mgon po mtsho stood, said goodbye, and went toward her livestock. When I looked at Brother, I saw he had cried too. We had lost our desire to collect caterpillar fungus and returned in the direction of our tent.

As we neared we saw many people gathered around the tents. Feeling nervous I rushed to the tents without thinking. Mother and my sisters were already inside. I asked Mother what had happened.

She said, "Chu ma and Sha sbrang villagers fought this morning. Men on each side were hurt."

I was shocked and wondered what would happen next. The next day we got up and went to collect caterpillar fungus at around nine AM. The Sha sbrang Village chieftain told us, "Don't go near the border. You will be responsible for whatever happens if you do. I don't want to start more conflicts."

We followed the others and climbed the mountain in front of our camp. Meanwhile, I saw all the Sha sbrang villagers, except for elders and children, going to the borderland. I looked for the policemen. They were in their tents, acting as if nothing special was going on. I imagined that they were unaware of what had happened the day before. I hoped that they would prevent any coming fight.



At around two PM I heard a terrible noise from the borderland. I stood, listened carefully, and was sure people were fighting. Some young men climbed to the mountaintop and I followed. We could see the fighting clearly from our vantage point. Men from the two communities had gathered on the hills on either side of a valley, facing each other, and were using slingshots to fire stones at their enemies. Stones fell like hail. Some women helped injured men back to the tents, while others collected stones and gave them to their men. I looked at the policemen's tents hoping the police would stop the fighting, but they did nothing. All I could do was pray to the mountain deities.

Three hours passed. The fighting continued. Some monks went between the two groups of men trying to stop the fighting. Then, half an hour later, the fighting stopped. I felt better. I descended the mountain and went to Mother. I guessed she would scold me, but she only asked me what I had seen. I told her everything in detail.

That evening I heard that forty-three men from Sha sbrang Village had been wounded, seven of whom were badly hurt. Chu ma Village had fifty-six wounded, thirteen of whom were so badly hurt that they had been sent to a hospital in Gansu Province. Suddenly our tent door opened and two strangers entered. They were local officials announcing that we had to leave, as they could no longer guarantee our safety. They said they would not help us if we disobeyed. Everyone ignored them even though they came repeatedly to persuade us to return home.

Several days passed, and nothing happened between the two feuding groups, though they often gathered and had menacing standoffs. The collectors were busy collecting caterpillar fungus. Then in the middle of one snowy night, Mother shouted and woke me up. I heard gunshots. I had no idea what to do. Brother carried me outside, and I saw that all of our villagers were running. Sha sbrang men held weapons. Some shouted that today was as good a day as any to sacrifice their lives. Women and children were screaming.

I asked Mother what had happened. She said that Chu ma villagers had surrounded the Sha sbrang villagers. This scared me. I had no time to imagine what would happen and ran as fast as I could.



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After a moment, everything became quiet, just like nothing had happened. Our village leader shouted at us to return. We stood silently for a bit and then hesitatingly returned.

Meanwhile, Brother announced that the policemen had grabbed ten men and wounded seven. I asked Brother why the policemen had hurt innocent people.

He explained, "Provincial leaders came to our county to investigate and discovered people were fighting on the grassland. They criticized the local leaders and ordered them to solve the problem. The local leaders were enraged and ordered the policemen to catch ten people from each village."

We soon returned home and our lives returned to normal, but what I had seen and heard on the grassland was awful and unforgettable.



A SMALL PIECE OF TURQUOISE<sup>1</sup>

Nyi ma rgyal mtshan ཉི་མ་རྒྱལ་མཚན།

My friend, who I will call Bkra shis, told me this story about running away from his home in the grasslands of Khri ka, to Lha sa. I've embellished certain aspects of the story but also left out certain events. Although based on reality, this story should be considered fictional.

...

**T**hrough the long dreary days of another semester at school, I had become fixated on the idea of going to Lha sa. But how could I tell my parents? I decided to wait for the upcoming holiday and thought long and hard about what I would say to them.

When I got home from the boarding school where I was studying, my parents asked me about my studies. As she always did whenever I returned for the holidays, Mother made a big meal of beef dumplings, my favorite food.

While we were having dinner, I told them about my plan for the summer holiday.

"What did you say?" Father said suspiciously.

"I want to go to a monastery to study Tibetan during the summer vacation," I said bravely.

At first, Father didn't agree. "Don't lie to me. Boys always want to do this and that. If you want to study, you should study at school and at home. Why do you want to go to a monastery to study?" Father asked impatiently.

"It's really different there. There are many scholars in the monastery. But in school..." I started.

Father interrupted, "I know that! Don't talk so much!"

The house was very quiet for a moment. Mother then gently spoke to Father, emphasizing how helpful and important studying in the monastery would be for me. He didn't say anything. Our house grew still again.

Finally, Father said, "OK, it's up to you."

<sup>1</sup> Nyima Gyamtsan. 2014. A Small Piece of Turquoise. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 35:127-141.



Three days later, I went to Khri ka County Town and then immediately boarded a bus for Zi ling. We reached the city in the late afternoon, as the sun was setting behind tall buildings. I looked out the window. It was my first time to travel so far from home. I was amazed to see so many different buildings. Some seemed as tall as the mountains in my village. There were more vehicles in Zi ling than my hometown had livestock. People swarmed on the roads and around buildings like ants in the summer. I didn't recognize any Tibetans in the crowd. Everyone seemed Chinese to me.

The bus stopped at the bus station. I got off, quickly made my way to the window where bus tickets were sold, and asked for a ticket to Lha sa. They were sold out. I didn't know what to do. I sat down next to a column in the waiting room and considered my options.

After some time, a girl in a sleek black coat came over and said in Chinese, "Hello! Where are you going?" in a friendly and kind way.

"I want to go to Lha sa, but the tickets have sold out," I replied.

She smiled and said, "I'm going to Lha sa. I'm just waiting for my friend to join me. We bought our tickets the day before yesterday."

"Great," I said, though I didn't feel great about it. I felt like she was gloating at my misfortune.

The girl then asked me in Chinese how to pronounce a few different words and have a simple conversation in Tibetan. I taught her a few bits and pieces of the language, introduced Lha sa and the Po ta la Palace, and described some other famous sites in Lha sa.

Time passed quickly. After it had been dark for some time, the girl left. I stayed in the ticket hall and went back to pondering what to do. There weren't many people there in the hall - just me and a few old men. Some were chatting in Chinese and smoking. I couldn't understand most of what they were saying. I guess they were speaking their own dialect rather than the Chinese I had learned at school.

After an hour had passed, I was still trying to come up with a solution to my predicament, when the Chinese girl in the sleek black



coat reappeared. "My friend has been delayed and isn't going to arrive in time, so it looks like I'm left with an extra ticket. Do you want it? Can I sell you her ticket?"

I looked at her carefully. I'd only just met her and was worried about her real motives. Was she a thief or a swindler? I gazed at her silently, trying to read her body language.

After a couple of seconds, I realized I had no way of knowing, so I asked, "How much is it?"

"Don't worry. I know you're a student. And since I'm a student too, I'll sell it to you cheaply. My friend paid 433 *yuan*, but you only need to give me 200. Is that OK?" she said.

I didn't even need to think about it before fishing in my pocket and handing over the money. She gave me the ticket and said, "We're going to be on the same bus. Don't lose your ticket. I'll see you soon," and then she turned and left. I clutched the ticket tightly and thought about Lha sa.

Darkness deepened.

I walked outside and gazed at the bright, flashing multi-colored lights that adorned buildings in every direction. Even the street lamps seemed brighter and more beautiful in comparison to my dusty hometown. After wandering around, I drifted back to the bus station.

A huge crowd was pouring out of the bus station. I pushed my way inside and looked around for the girl, but didn't see her. As the sea of unfamiliar faces swelled around me, I grew increasingly nervous and continued scanning the crowd. Suddenly, a voice came from behind me, "What are you doing?"

I turned and saw the girl in the sleek black coat pushing through the crowd. "The bus will leave soon. Get on now! Hurry!"

I followed her through the crowd and downstairs, and we boarded the bus to Lha sa together.

The bus was different from any I had been on before. Instead of seats, the bus was full of narrow bunk beds. There were three rows of beds across the bus, separated by two aisles. Each bed had its own number. Passengers crowded onto the bus, shuffling down the aisles, looking for their places. My bed was the top bunk, next to a window.



The Chinese girl's bed was across the aisle to the left of mine, in the center of the bus.

"What's your name?" she asked as we settled into our beds.

"I'm Bkra shis," I replied.

"Many Tibetans are named Bkra shis. What does it mean?" she asked.

"It means something like 'lucky' or 'auspicious'," I explained, as we pulled out of the station. We continued chatting as the bus traveled through the night.

After spending the night on the bus, we stopped in a small town as the sun was rising. Most passengers got off the bus and had breakfast, but I didn't. I took my school bag from under my pillow, brought out some *rtsam pa*, and began eating it, sitting on my bunk bed with my legs dangling into the aisle.

When the passengers returned, the girl asked, "Why didn't you come and eat breakfast with us?"

"I ate here," I answered.

She smiled silently, reached into her backpack, pulled out a few pieces of fruit, and offered them to me.

"No thanks," I said.

She put them on my pillow and said, "We're both students, and we should help each other."

As the bus rumbled out onto the road, she rolled over in her bunk, turned to me, and said, "What should I say when I first meet a Tibetan?"

I explained how to offer greetings in Tibetan, and then she asked me how to say simple things like, "What's your name?" "How are you?" "I like it here." "How old are you?" and "Goodbye."

Most passengers on the bus seemed not to know each other. Very few talked to each other. However, gradually, the Chinese girl and I spoke to each other more and more as time went on.

Three days later, we reached Lha sa in the morning. She asked, "What are you going to do this afternoon? If you have time, come to the Po ta la Park with me. I'll wait for you there."

"OK," I replied. I was eager to see the Po ta la Palace because I hadn't seen it from the bus as we drove through town. I found a



motorcycle taxi outside the bus station and zoomed off to Se ra Monastery. Although I didn't know anyone there, I thought, "There are many A mdo monks there. I'm sure I can find someone to ask for help."

Se ra is a bit far from Lha sa City. After about half an hour on the motorcycle, I reached the foot of the big mountain where the monastery is located and got off the motorcycle. I asked the first monk I saw to help me find someone from A mdo. I had some trouble explaining myself because he couldn't understand my dialect very well, but he eventually got the idea and led me to the quarters of a young monk who was studying a Buddhist scripture. He said to the young monk, "Hey! Skal bzang! Some guy from A mdo is looking for you."

"Oh! Come in, please," Skal bzang replied.

I sat silently while the two monks chatted in Lha sa dialect. I couldn't understand most of what they were saying. Every now and then, the A mdo monk asked me a question in our dialect and then resumed talking to the other monk in Lha sa dialect. Eventually, they finished their conversation, and the monk who had brought me to the room said, slowly and loudly, "OK, I'll go study. You two chat."

Skal bzang offered me bread and *rtsam pa* and asked kindly, "Where in A mdo are you from?"

"I'm from Khri ka County Town," I lied.

"Is this your first time in Lha sa?" he asked.

"Yes, my first time," I answered.

"Great! Rest today. I have a debate class in the Philosophy College this afternoon. I'll take you to the Po ta la Palace to worship tomorrow," he said.

I thought about it for a second and decided not to worry about meeting the girl from the bus. "Sure," I said, and put my backpack in the corner of the room.

The next day, he took me to see the Po ta la, the Jo khang, and some of the temples in Se ra and introduced the images and scriptures in each temple. The whole time we were visiting, a stranger followed us from a distance. I guessed he was probably a thief, looking for a chance to rob us.



We had dinner in a small restaurant near Se ra Monastery before returning to Skal bzang's room, where we drank hot water and chatted about our visit to the different temples. After a while, I mentioned the stranger I had seen following us. "I guess he was a thief," I said.

"No, I don't think so. I guess he was..." said Skal bzang, and then stopped.

"Well? Who was he?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered nervously. We both fell silent, and our conversation ended awkwardly.

The next day, I went to one of the temples in Se ra to worship. As I stood in the courtyard, catching my breath after making prostrations, a monk approached and said, "Hey, boy! Where are you from? If you've finished worshipping here, you should move on."

Flustered, I left the temple and walked back to Skal bzang's quarters, where I spent the rest of the day.

Three days later, I decided to move to a small hotel in Lha sa City. I had hardly any money, so I found a cheap, rundown place. I could barely afford enough food to fill my stomach. I needed a job and went to many restaurants and shops, looking for any kind of work, but nobody would hire me.

After three days of looking, I finally found a restaurant that would pay me three meals a day. It was better than nothing, so I took it.

After working there for two weeks, the boss sent me to buy some butter. I bought it and, as I was coming back, I saw a nice piece of turquoise for sale at a shop in the Bar skor. I picked it up, looked at it carefully, and asked, "How much is it?" in rapid A mdo dialect.

The storekeeper asked, "What?" in confusion.

"You are from A mdo!" a girl on my right suddenly said, speaking to me in my own dialect.

"Yes. I'm from A mdo. You too?" I replied.

"Oh! Are you a student? Did you run away from home?" she asked without answering my first question.

"I'm from A mdo, but I'm not a student," I said.



"Don't lie. I know you are a student and that you've run away from home. There are many students here in Lha sa who have run away from home, just like you," she said with a smile.

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I responded, shyly, "Yes, I'm a student." I was confused. I wondered how she knew so much about me.

She was wearing a short white polyester shirt, had an expensive-looking MP3 player, and wore fashionable sunglasses. Her clothes were clean. She had a lovely voice and spoke the A mdo dialect perfectly. She was also beautiful and seemed kind.

"Do you like this turquoise?" she asked kindly.

"No," I replied.

"Then why were you looking at it so closely?" she said, looking into my eyes.

I didn't say anything.

"Where do you work?" she asked.

"At a Tibetan restaurant," I replied.

"How much do they pay you each month?" she asked.

"I only get three meals a day," I answered.

"What! They don't pay you anything? How strange! Don't get stuck in a hopeless situation like that. It's not difficult to find work here, especially for a student like you who knows Chinese. You can easily make money. Perhaps I can help you find a job," she suggested.

"Thanks!" I said, taken aback by her generosity.

We chatted for a bit longer and then she gave me her cell phone number. "If you need help, call me any time. My name's Dbang mo," she said.

I quickly returned to the restaurant and immediately noticed that the boss had a bloodshot, swollen left eye. "What happened?" I asked.

"I ran into a wall," she said awkwardly.

The next day while having lunch, my boss said to me, "Tonight, I need you to sleep in the restaurant."

"OK," I answered.

Two girls worked in the restaurant with me. They usually slept in the restaurant but, later that afternoon, they explained, "There's



going to be a big celebration tonight. We want to go, so you and the boss's brother will sleep here."

They went out a little while later, leaving the boss's younger brother and me alone together. He was drinking beer and seemed very unhappy. "Where did my sister go?" he angrily asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"Why don't you know? You must know. Tell me! Where is my sister?" he demanded.

There was something odd about him and his tone of voice. I thought he might be mentally disturbed. I'd seen him around before but had never spoken to him. I wasn't really sure about him. I said, "Your sister is at home. Do you want me to take you there?"

"Sure," he said, and suddenly seemed happy. He stood up, and we started to leave, but when we got to the door of the restaurant, we found that it was locked from the outside.

We tried with all our strength to open the door, but it wouldn't move an inch. The more we shook the door, the more enraged he became. First, he was angry at the door, then with his sister, and then, he became angry with me.

Later, when we were sitting together on the cot where he usually slept in the back of the restaurant, he sipped from a cup of tea, looked at me strangely, and said, "Poor boy, you only have one night left to live."

He kept staring at me, but every now and then, his eyes would dart towards the head of his bed.

I didn't say anything. After what seemed like an eternity, he stood up and went off to the bathroom.

I leaned over, pressed down on his pillow, and felt something hard underneath. I slowly lifted the pillow and saw a cleaver. Shocked, I didn't know what to do. Immediately I put the pillow back and then, after thinking for a second, I lifted the pillow, grabbed the cleaver, and pushed it under his bed, up against the wall where he couldn't easily reach it. Then, I stood up and quickly went into the kitchen, where I found a small knife and hid it in my pocket. Finally, I rushed back to his cot and sat exactly where I had been sitting before.



He came back, sat down, picked up a bottle of beer, and smiled at me as he took a swig. It wasn't a nice smile. I was terrified, but I didn't want him to know that. Suddenly he yelled, "Where's my cleaver? Where'd you put it?"

I stood up and backed away, keeping my eyes fixed on him. I didn't say anything. He lunged at me, and I jumped behind a table. He lunged again and ended up chasing me around the restaurant.

After a minute, he caught me. We grappled with one another. At some point, he grabbed me by the throat and started squeezing. As I stared into his cold, bulging eyes, I could feel the air in my lungs running out. I couldn't take another breath. I thrust my hand into my pocket, grabbed the knife, and desperately stabbed it into his leg again and again as he screamed and squeezed my neck more tightly. Then he grabbed my hand and twisted it, forcing me to drop the knife.

He lunged forward and picked up the knife, releasing me in the process. I ran over and got the cleaver from under his bed. He looked at me and said, "Poor boy, now I'm going to kill you."

"I'll kill you if you come near me!" I yelled.

I ran to the front door and threw myself against it with all of my strength. Luckily, it burst open, and I rolled out into the street. Many people were crowded outside the door. They were surprised when they saw the blood on my hands and clothes.

"Not me! Him!" I cried, pointing inside.

"What happened? Tell us!" someone shouted.

"He's a lunatic! He tried to kill me," I replied, still gasping for breath, looking over my shoulder to see if he was following me.

"We know. He's insane. Get out of here, quickly!" someone said worriedly. I turned and ran without looking back. When I got to my hotel, I called my boss and the two girls and told them I was never going back.

The next morning, I phoned Skal bzang and asked him to help me. I told him I didn't want to work in that restaurant again, but I really needed some sort of job. He was unable to help me because he had been ordered not to leave his monastery. Not knowing what else



to do, I called Dbang mo and told her my problems. She said, "OK, don't worry. I'll be there soon."

After she arrived, we talked about what I should do. She said, "Don't worry about finding a job. I have some friends here. I'll ask around and see what I can do. I'm sure I can find someone to help you."

I thanked her and then she went to work.

She came at noon the next day and said, "One of my friends has a job at a hotel for you. You can begin work there starting tomorrow. Here's the address. Go there first thing tomorrow morning."

When I heard this news, I happily thanked her.

She smiled, and said, "You're welcome."

I moved to the hotel the next morning. There seemed little for me to do. I mostly hung around the hotel and helped out with odd jobs. I was free most of the time. The boss was kind and the workers were friendly. I couldn't stop thinking about Dbang mo. In fact, I had fallen in love with her.

One day, the boss of the hotel called me. I thought he had something for me to do but, when I arrived, he gave me 500 RMB and said, "Go buy some new clothes. This money is not your salary. After a full month, I'll give you your salary!"

I thanked him and, as I was leaving, I looked at the money and thought, "Why did he give me this money? Perhaps because my clothes are so old and dirty? Or perhaps because I'm Dbang mo's friend?"

Not knowing where to go, I called Dbang mo. After greeting her, I said, "I want to buy some clothes. Do you have time to help me?"

"Sure. I don't need to work today and I don't want to stay at home. Where are you now?" she asked.

"In front of the hotel," I said,

"OK. Stay there. I'll be there soon," she said sweetly and arrived half an hour later. She took me to a market where I bought a T-shirt decorated with the eyes of the Buddha, a light brown Nepali



jacket, and a pair of camouflage pants. When I put on the new clothes, she looked at me and said, "You're so handsome!"

I smiled shyly but said nothing.

When it was suppertime, I invited her to a restaurant. While we were eating, she asked me about my work. I described my work at the hotel and explained that the hotel boss was kind to me.

"Wonderful!" she said.

After we chatted a bit longer, she went to her place and I returned to the hotel.

We continued to meet almost every day over the next two weeks. One day, she called me early in the morning and said, "Can you come to my place?"

I asked my boss for permission, and he dismissed me with a wave of his hand. On the way to her place, I bought a bag of rice and some vegetables. When I arrived, she said, "Why did you buy such things? I have enough food here. You shouldn't waste your money."

"I didn't waste my money," I replied.

"You like rice, right? I'll cook rice and some vegetable dishes for lunch," she said.

Later, while we were eating, she said, "I called you today because I was feeling down."

We talked for a long time and then walked to the Po ta la. Even though it took two hours to walk there and back, the time flew by.

We bought some milk just before we got back to her place. "Let me heat that up for you," I said once we were inside her room. I poured the milk into a pot, boiled it, poured it into a bowl, and gave it to her.

She sipped it and said, "It's delicious." I guessed she was just saying that to make me happy.

The weather soon turned cold, as dark, low-hanging, clouds covered the sun. We sat on her sofa looking at the pictures in one of her photo albums. She'd been to many places. After a while, she cooked dinner on a small stove in a corner of her room. While we were eating, it began raining.

"I want to leave before the rain gets heavier," I said.



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"You should wait. You can go after the rain stops," she replied.

We then talked about her past and my past, as the room slowly became dimmer. The night deepened and the rain continued.

Dbang mo said, "Don't go back to the hotel tonight. I'll talk to your boss tomorrow. Don't worry!"

It was now after ten PM. I told Dbang mo a love story, and then we chatted about trivial things. Next, she told me a story, and then I told her a ghost story.

It was very late when she went to bed. I lay on the sofa. She read a Chinese book, while I read a newspaper. I soon turned off the light but was unable to sleep. I kept thinking about Dbang mo. At around midnight she called to me and said, "That ghost story made me very afraid. I can't sleep. Can you come here until I fall asleep?"

"Are you sure that's OK?" I asked.

"Why not?" she answered.

I went to her bed and lay down. We chatted very quietly, as the drizzle continued. Eventually, we ran out of things to say and fell quiet. We both lay there stiffly, and then slowly moved nearer and nearer to each other. Soon, her right hand was on my chest. She patted me gently. I put my right arm around her neck and kissed her forehead.

Everything stopped. Just her and me. Me and her. Her and her smile for me. Only the two of us. In that quiet room, on that rainy night, she and I spent our first evening as lovers.

The next morning, someone knocked on the door. I was still in a dream and wondered who had come. When she opened the door, it was only the postman bringing a newspaper.

She cooked breakfast as I lay in bed. I looked at her and thought, "This is like a family, a wonderful family." I was happy and at ease. I was overwhelmed with feelings of love and happiness that I could not express. We spent a blissful morning together before I went to work.

A few days later, I managed to get away from work, and Dbang mo and I left for a short vacation, visiting a few famous places outside Lha sa. We enjoyed two romantic weeks together. After we returned, I called my parents, asked how they were, and then



returned to work in the hotel. That night, Dbang mo called me, and we chatted about her work for about an hour.

A few days later, as I was walking along Bar skor Street, someone suddenly grabbed my shoulder and called out, "I found you!"

I turned. It was my uncle. I was speechless.

"What are you doing here?" he angrily demanded.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. My heart started racing and my head began to swim. Before I could open my mouth to speak, I fainted onto the cold stone pavement.

When I woke up, I was lying on a bed in a hotel room. My parents were there, along with my uncle, and a monk from our hometown. Mother was weeping. Uncle glared at me and said, "We've spent nearly all our time in this room! It's so boring. We should be outside visiting temples and Lha sa City, but we don't know the way very well. Now that you're awake you can show us around, right?"

He was eager to visit places of interest, but the others didn't want to go anywhere. They were relieved just to see me again and wanted to relax. I was unhappy and didn't say anything. I knew they would force me to return home, and then I would no longer be able to see Dbang mo. I plodded around Lha sa, showing my uncle the sites.

Later, when we stopped for a short break, Uncle said, "Don't worry. You are young and don't understand what you really want. You need to continue your schooling. Study hard. That's what's best for you."

I was sad and didn't know what to say, so I kept silent.

"Why are you so quiet?" Uncle asked.

I said nothing, as tears came from my eyes.

He said, "You have a girlfriend here, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered quietly, "I want to visit her now."

He looked at me, and then finally said, "OK, let's go see her."

I took him to her place and told him to wait outside. I went inside and found her cooking. She smiled and said, "Sit down! I've almost finished making dinner. What would you like to drink?"

I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Tears dribbled from my eyes. She hugged me and asked, "What happened to you, dear?"



Slowly, I muttered, "I... have to go... back home. My parents... my parents came and found... found me today."

"I knew this would happen, but I couldn't stop myself from falling in love with you," she said, as tears coursed unchecked down her cheeks.

"I love you, too. You're a good woman and have been so nice to me. But, bad things happen..." I said.

"Yes, bad things happen, even to nice people," she said sadly.

I wiped away her tears and, just as I was about to say something, she hugged me tightly and sobbed loudly. It seemed she couldn't talk or breathe.

Finally, she wiped her tears away and said, "Don't be sad. Everything will be fine soon."

I wondered, "How can she be so kind to me? Why would she say that everything will be fine soon?"

We embraced again, and then she walked me to the door. It was very hard for me to say goodbye.

"Bkra shis, you must come now!" Uncle called from the street.

I didn't reply. Dbang mo was very quiet as I turned and walked away, choking back tears.

"Let's go," I said to Uncle. As we started to leave, a single tear fell from my right eye. Uncle noticed and stood in shock. Suddenly, he asked, "So, you really love her?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Can you live without her?" he asked seriously.

"I can't. We love each other," I replied sadly.

"If that's true, you can bring her back home with us. I'm not kidding," he said, quietly and kindly.

I looked at his face disbelievingly and asked, "Are you sure?"

"Why not?" he answered.

"I'm afraid of my parents," I replied.


"Don't worry. I'll explain everything to them," he said.

I ran back to her room, but when I opened the door, the room was already empty, except for a small, familiar piece of turquoise on the table.



UNDER THE SHADOW<sup>1</sup>

Dpa' brtse rgyal དཔལ་བརྩེ་རྒྱལ།

 ll through my schooling in A mdo, I admired the "selfless soldiers" in the many stories that we were taught - stories that originated in the Chinese Communist revolution, and were supposed to provide the foundation for our new society, since the 1950s. Our heroes were modest, self-sacrificing, and thought only of the greater good of those around them. Comrade Lei Feng<sup>2</sup> was one of those we admired most, especially in elementary school. At recess, the boys ran around with make-believe guns, pretending to be the exemplary and selfless soldiers we kept hearing about, willing to die because our country told us we should.

But there came a time when I remembered lessons I had learned even earlier, from the Tibetan folktales Grandmother had told me when I was a very young child. Ri bong blo ldan 'Wise Rabbit' was my favorite; he often used his wisdom to save weak animals from stronger ones. This story describes an incident that forced me to find my own voice, and that made me wish to become someone like Wise Rabbit.

...

"Breakfast is ready Dpa' le!" Mother said, calling me by my nickname. She then resumed chanting *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM*, the six-syllable Sanskrit mantra of Spyana ras gzigs 'Avalokiteśvara'. Along with Mother's gentle wake-up call, the soothing crackle of dried yak dung

<sup>1</sup> Huatse Gyal. 2014. Under the Shadow. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 35:143-158.

<sup>2</sup> Lei Feng (1940-1962) is depicted as a selfless, modest soldier of the People's Liberation Army. These qualities, plus his devotion to Chairman Mao, led him to be vaunted as a model citizen through the post-Maoist years. A bit of a story I remember has Lei Feng eating lunch at his camp. When he sees an elderly woman carrying a big load of wood, he immediately goes to help her and happily offers her his lunch. Lei Feng's picture was hung up on the classroom walls, blazoned with the motto, "Xiang Lei Feng xuexi 'Learn From Lei Feng'."



burning in our home's adobe stove, the whistle from the tea-filled kettle boiling, and the fragrant smell of juniper incense woke me up.

Every day, like all Tibetan mothers in my hometown, my mother wakes up at the crack of dawn to prepare breakfast and makes offerings to the mountain deities on the family's offering altar, which is located right behind my family's adobe house. First, she places some smoldering yak dung on the offering platform. She then places three spoons of roasted barley flour mixed with butter on the fire. After that, she pours a few drops of milk tea on top of it and then uses a ladle to make libations in the direction of the mountains, where the village's protective deities reside. Finally, she prays to the mountain deities - eyes closed, palms held together with fervent devotion - beseeching them to bring good health, prosperity, and safety to my family and to all sentient beings. After making offerings to protect the family, Mother then prepares breakfast before waking everyone up.

I stretched and yawned. Mother turned to me and said, "Dpa' le, it's snowing heavily outside. You probably can't go to school today," before adding more yak dung and wood to the stove. The yak dung and wood started burning immediately. The flame inside the stove grew bigger and bigger and the sputtering of the fire increased, as large yellow flames rushed into the chimney hole, as if the flames were deliberately avoiding the center of the teapot.

"It's going to be very snowy and windy, Dpa' le. Do you have to go to school today?" Father asked while still lying in bed, wrapped in his blanket to avoid the icy wind coming through the open spaces around the window frame.

"Yes, I have to go today. My class teacher has recently started taking student attendance very seriously. I am also the class vice-monitor, so I have to be at school on time," I said while looking for some warm clothes. I began worrying about returning late to my senior middle school, where I boarded.

...

Typically, each class has a teacher who is in charge of checking sanitation and organizing student work. They are addressed as *ban zhuren* in Chinese and *'dzin bdag* in Tibetan. Just as each county



town or prefecture government has a principle leader and a vice-leader, each school has a principle headmaster and vice-headmaster, and each class typically has a *zheng banzhang* 'principle monitor' and a *fu banzhang* 'vice-monitor'. This centralized hierarchy extends right from the principal all the way down to each dorm room. Each level has the right to punish the one below them, but is also responsible for their conduct, and can expect punishment from those above them. I was the vice-monitor of my senior middle school class. It is a mark of honor and respect, and all students in positions like these are expected to be just like Lei Feng - models of exemplary behavior and performance at all times.

Our major responsibilities as class monitors were taking attendance, collecting class fees from students and, most importantly, conducting "sanitary inspections" of students' dormitory rooms, including the girls' rooms, under the jurisdiction of our class teacher. We conducted these inspections almost every night at around ten o'clock, alongside schoolteachers and other staff, including our class teacher, Tshe ring. The results of the "sanitary inspection" were publicly announced each week in front of all the students on the school's soccer field where we also did daily morning exercises. Two rooms, one boys' and one girls', in the dormitory were selected as the best rooms of the week and were awarded a new hand towel, a bag of detergent, and a red flag.

I shared Room 111 with the principle monitor and four other boys. Ironically, despite being the inspectors, our room was only chosen once as "exemplary." Room 302 was a girls' room; they frequently were rewarded for keeping their room clean and tidy. Many of our classmates made fun of us by referring to us as "the two hypocritical class monitors." Frankly, we cared neither about the inspection nor the awards. We just followed our class teacher and enjoyed inspecting the girls' rooms because they offered us hot water during our inspections as a gesture of hospitality, and we, or at least I, thought it was cool to walk with the class teacher to inspect the girls' rooms, because the very act of walking with teachers also gave us a sense of authority and power.



...

"Dpa' le, if you have to go, then you had better get ready soon before the weather gets even worse in the afternoon. I made some offerings to the mountain deities early this morning, and I will also make more offerings now and later today. Hopefully, the snow will stop and the sky will soon clear," Mother said, bringing me some pants and a warm-looking pair of old sports shoes.

"Sure Mother, it will be fine," I said worriedly.

"I'll check the weather outside. It's dangerous to ride a motorcycle to the county seat in this weather," Father said.

He stood up, putting on his sheepskin robe. Clearing his throat, he opened the door and went outside. As he went into the courtyard, the squeaky, crunchy sound of snow under his boots came in with a wintry gust of air. The sound was clear and deep, and then it gradually faded as he walked a dozen steps further, until only his footprints were visible in the snow.

Father usually gave me a ride to the county seat on his motorcycle. From there, I would take a public bus for about two hours to my school in a nearby county. We had to go through hundreds of zigzags and steep slopes on the mountains to reach the village county seat. Since my family lived far from school, I usually only went home one or twice each semester.

...

"You'll freeze in this weather. Wait until the snow stops," Father said when he returned, using a towel to wipe the snow off his head.

"If I wait too long, I'll miss the bus at the county town," I replied, concerned about the consequences of returning late to school. I began to worry. "Would I be commanded to stand and be beaten in front of the class? Would I be asked to clean the classroom for a week? Would I, would I, would I...?"

"Tell your teacher there was too much snow," Father said.

"Father, he won't listen," I argued, hopelessly.

So, I waited and waited in the house while my parents went to give some fodder to our sheep and yaks. Mother came back and said, "Two lambs have frozen to death. There is no way you can go to school in this weather."



"I have to make it to school today, Mother," I replied, beginning to panic.

It snowed almost all day. The next day was even worse, with a very sharp wind that blew snow in the air.

So, just like that, I had to wait at home for three days. I was nervous because I was afraid of being punished and embarrassed in front of the whole school. Such things had happened to other students. I felt if there was one magical thing that I could do in my life, I would stop the snow at all costs. Almost every half hour, I went outside and checked the weather. Every time I saw a clear spot in the sky, I would run back to the house and inform my parents about the weather, because they were also very concerned about me returning late to school. Then, when I saw the clear spots in the sky give way to dark clouds rising up from the mountains in the west, I was deeply downhearted. During the three days of waiting for the sun, my hope was probably killed more than a hundred times.

Finally, there was some sun!

My father took me to the county seat on his motorcycle. The road from my village to the county seat was covered in snow; some sections were still frozen. Along the way, we fell at least three times. Fortunately, we were not seriously hurt, although passing cars, trucks, and motorcycles spattered our shoes and pants with mud.

...

I arrived at school just in time to see the Tibetan headmaster's fancy Hongqi 'Red Flag' brand car coming through the school's rusty metal gate. My buddies from Room 111 nicknamed him Xiaozhang ske 'khyog-'Principal Crooked-neck'. Schoolteachers, school administrators, and staff feared him, including my class teacher, Tshering. Our school headmaster never smiled. He ruled the school like it was his own personal fiefdom, by insisting that only the vice headmaster had the right to report school issues to him. He used fear and intimidation to run the school. He had surveillance cameras installed in classrooms, dormitory hallways, and above the school gate. When he saw students loitering in the classroom through the surveillance camera on his computer, he would call the teacher responsible for that class and roar, "Control your students or lose



your job!" The class teacher would then angrily run from his office to the classroom, and coerce students to behave by scolding or beating them.

It was lunchtime. The schoolteachers were coming out of the school gate one after another. There were groups of students coming out to buy some snacks. Those who could afford it were rushing into a well-known meat dumpling restaurant right outside the school.

To avoid the possibility of being scolded in front of everyone, I did not enter through the gate, but climbed over a crumbling school wall behind the school buildings and headed straight for my dormitory.

My plan utterly failed. As I approached my dorm, Teacher Tshe ring, a short, stout man who usually wore a gold-colored suit and combed his thick hair up onto his head, came towards me. I tried to avoid him, but he called out, "Hi, come here!"

I approached him, hoping the girl I was dating was not nearby. But when I saw some of her friends coming towards us in the distance, my heart pounded and my face started burning. What can you do when class points, awards, rankings, and red flags are the only measure of your worth? I was very angry and felt hopeless. I was not really thinking of "human dignity" at the time, but I was very angry and felt hopeless.

"Why on earth have you come to school so late!? Do you have any idea how many points our class has lost because of your absence!? Do you think you can come whenever you want to!? This is a school, not a free marketplace!<sup>1</sup> Don't you know that!? Don't you know you are the class's vice monitor!? You should be a role model for the class!" the class teacher yelled, without giving me a chance to explain.

Students stared at me as I gazed at my shoes, feeling trapped, like a small rabbit standing in front of a giant tiger.

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<sup>1</sup> Free marketplace '*ziyou shichang*' alludes to the winding streets in the town, where pool halls and Internet cafes are located. Teacher Tshe ring was suggesting that a free marketplace is unruly and one can come and go there as one pleases, but school is different.



After his long speech, I said under my breath, "I am sorry. It snowed heavily in my home place, so I couldn't come to school on time."

"It snowed in other places as well! How come students from other places could still come to school even if there was snow?" he shouted.

He totally ignored my explanation. I was thinking that he at least should have known that when snow falls throughout a big region, it snows more in some areas and less in others. But trying to reason with him was, as a Tibetan proverb says *spyang ki'i rna chos bshad* 'Like teaching the Dharma in the ears of wolves'. So I kept my mouth shut.

He continued, "Today is Sunday. We are going to have our weekly class meeting tonight. At the meeting, you must read a letter of self-criticism, apologize to the class, and promise you will never repeat this mistake again. Now get out of here!"

...

I went straight to my dorm, feeling humiliated. Worse yet, I was very embarrassed that he had created such a scene in front of my girlfriend's friends, who would surely report everything to her.

When I got to my room, at least my dorm room buddies greeted me warmly.

"How come you came a few days late?"

"Did something happen to your family?"

"Our class teacher was very angry about your absence, but it should be fine. Don't worry."

Still stinging from the harsh encounter with the class teacher, I simply said, "There was just too much snow..."

I put my backpack on my bed and went to the classroom. My other classmates asked similar questions, and my reply was the same. I was not sure if my classmates from towns could really understand when I said I couldn't come on time because of bad weather. Classmates from herding and farming areas definitely understood what I meant, or should have. Of course, my classmates did not expect me to apologize to the class for my absence, but our class



teacher thought that having such a ritual performance was very important.

...

At home, my parents chanted *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM*. At school, our mantra was the two-syllable word *gaokao* 'college entrance examination', and was the central topic of most discussions, conversations, meetings, and even classes. The phrase *mi tshe'i dkyogs mtshams* "life-changing event" or "turning point in your life" was used constantly to heighten the importance of the *gaokao*, as if life would be perfect after enrolling in a good university. Many of my classmates were studying for the *gaokao* in the classroom when I entered. I took a piece of paper and a pen from my desk and started thinking about writing my self-criticism.

The basic structure of a letter of self-criticism is always the same. In the first of its three parts, you have to say what violations you committed. Second, you have to admit or recognize your violations. Third, you have to promise that it - whatever your violation was - will never happen again. I don't think there is a custom of writing a letter of self-criticism in Tibetan history, but it was commonly practiced during the Maoist years (1949-1976) in China. Basically, if your beliefs, thoughts, actions, or behaviors are deemed unhealthy or not in alignment with Party ideologies, you must undergo self-criticism, producing either written or verbal statements detailing how you have been ideologically mistaken.

...

I vividly recall the anger I felt as I brooded over the words of the class teacher and the embarrassing scene he had caused in front of so many students. I felt mistreated and humiliated. So, before putting even a single word on the paper, I decided not to write a letter of self-criticism. Instead, I wanted to take that opportunity to write about how unfair the class teacher had been to our class in general, and how unreasonable he was in my case in particular. I honestly thought that if I did that, my classmates would support me. To my knowledge, nobody in my class genuinely liked him.

The more I thought about the situation, the more confident I became. I could not promise that I would never be late to school



because no one can stop the snow. If someone had to write a letter of self-criticism, then it should have been the ruthless snow, which had not only prevented me from coming to school on time but had also senselessly frozen two of my family's lambs to death! But there was hardly room to reason with a sentient human being, let alone with the senseless snow.

...

I shared my ideas about speaking out against our class teacher with a few good friends, including the class's principle monitor, who was also from a herding place. He was, unlike me, very good at finding subtle ways of handling internal classroom politics. Most of us liked and respected his well-honed ideas and calm personality. To my relief, he was supportive and enthusiastic when I told him that I would neither write nor read a letter of self-criticism.

"Yes, don't write it. Our class teacher should understand that there was no way you could make it to school under such horrible weather conditions. *Khyod kyi phyogs nas ka langs langs byed* 'I will stand by your side like the pillar of a house'."

About an hour later, most of my classmates had heard that I would not read a letter of self-criticism. It didn't really matter much to them. They were all too busy and stressed about the *gaokao*, our "life-changing event."

...

The weekly class meeting started at around seven PM every Sunday. As the hour drew near, I grew increasingly nervous, but this did not weaken my resolve.

Silence prevailed in the classroom. Then our class teacher kicked open the wooden door, covered by a metal sheet, and strode into the classroom.

We courteously stood and chanted in one tone, "Greetings Teacher!"

He threw a book on the desk in the front of the classroom and flippantly said, "Sit, sit, sit."

Silently, he walked around the rows of desks. After several circuits, he approached my desk and said, "You just came to school



today?" as if he hadn't seen me earlier. I stood up, looking down at my desk, my heart in my throat.

"Huatse Gyal is our *banzhang*," he said, "and as a *banzhang*, he should know that he should be at school on time. But he was three days late. So at tonight's meeting, he is going to read a letter of self-criticism. Okay, read your letter to the class."

As I left my seat, he took mine, folded his arms across his chest, and sat stiffly upright. I went to the front of the class. Standing behind a tall wooden desk on a concrete stage, I leaned forward, putting my hands on the desk. This irked our teacher who bellowed, "Hey, get your hands off of the desk! Who, do you think you are - a lecturer with a PhD?"

At his command, I jumped and snatched my hands back up and started reading my "letter of self-criticism." I said, "You know I am from a herding community that is forty kilometers from the county seat. Unfortunately, it snowed a lot in my home area last week. It was impossible to travel to the county seat by any means. This is why I couldn't show up at school on time. I know I am supposed to read a letter of self-criticism here tonight, but I don't think..."

The teacher exploded from his chair, his face as red as fire. "Stop! Shut up! Who do you think you are?" he hollered.

At that moment, the class principle monitor stood up and said, "Teacher, we should let him say what he has to say."

Our teacher stared at my friend for a moment, his eyes wide with shock. It was unheard of for a student to openly contradict a teacher in this way. Then, slowly, he drew in a deep breath and sat back down. The room was utterly silent.

If my heart had been a container where I had stored all the bitterness from waiting for days for a glimpse of sunshine at home, falling off the motorbike on the icy road to town, enduring the blustery wind and coldness for about two hours, and going through the embarrassing scene he had caused in front of my classmates, that container was about to explode. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I continued, "Teacher, why do you never listen to your students? Do you think you're a good teacher? You teach us mathematics. All the



people in this class were top students when they were in junior middle school. But why do you think nobody in this class has ever scored above thirty-five percent on math exams? If you are really concerned about this class, that's a real issue. Why is being late because of a snowstorm such a big deal to you?"

I had more to say, but I looked up to see our class teacher charging ferociously toward me, looking like a bull ready to trample a mouse. My friend and some of the larger male students threw themselves in his path to prevent him from reaching me. Of course, he was not easily stopped. He was throwing his fists in the air as if to beat me, fiercely pulling away from the male students who were trying to stop him, shouting, "You arrogant little boy, I am going to kick you out of this school. Get out of this school now!!"

"Okay, you can kick me out of this school any time. This is not the only school on earth. I'm going to leave tomorrow," I replied heedlessly. The whole classroom was a mess. Our class teacher was still shouting, as he was pulled outside by some male students.

...

Fortunately, he didn't beat me, thanks to my friends for stopping him. He left the classroom. That night's "meeting" was over, just like that. I went back to my seat. The whole classroom was deadly silent. Everybody's eyes were transfixed on their books. It seemed as if their bodies were glued to their desks. Fear haunted my mind. It was inconceivable to some of my classmates that I would be so "rude" to our class teacher. Many, except for a few close friends, did not like my open confrontation, or at least I felt that way, as nobody talked to me on our way back to the dormitory. I also received some rather unwelcoming words and looks from my classmates in the following days and throughout the semester. As the famous contemporary Tibetan comedian and writer Sman bla skyabs said in his memoir, *Skra dang skra loi skor gyi bsam gzhihs 'Views on my Hair and Hairstyles'*.

It might be exaggerating to say that schools at that time were like weaponless armed forces, but most would agree that they were like



training grounds. All the great teachers were *bla ma* and their thoughts and words, whatever they were, had to be viewed as containers of gold.

This was written based on Sman bla skyabs's own schooling experiences in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but his descriptions of his school environment back then very much spoke to my own schooling experiences as well. Now I neither blame my classmates nor myself, I blame the authoritarian school environment.

...

Our class teacher summoned me to his office the next day. I thought he might beat me up once I arrived, but I went anyway. It would not have been the first time a teacher had beaten me. I knocked, and when he said, "Come in," he did not sound angry. I opened the door and went inside.

He said, "Sit there," pointing to a couch opposite his desk. I sat, and he continued. "So, it's good that you spoke out from the depth of your heart. That is a *stag sha ra zig (zhig) gi rtags red* 'sign of a good man', but you did not have to do it in front of the whole class. If you were dissatisfied with me as a teacher, you could have come to my office and shared your thoughts with me privately. Then, I would have really appreciated your thoughts. Why did you have to do it in front of the whole class? I heard that you were even talking to your friends about speaking out against me prior to our meeting."

I was totally shocked to hear this from him. I could see from his face that he was hurt by my open confrontation. There was a trace of humanity in his voice and words. I felt I was talking with someone who was constituted of flesh and feelings, not rules and rankings.

Afterward, pondering his heartfelt words during our private meeting, I started to regret my abrupt words to him. I had made him look bad in front of the whole class, just as he had made me look bad in front of the whole school. It seemed we were both hurt and embarrassed by such public denouncements. Deep in our hearts, we both wanted to be respected and treated humanely. Really, who doesn't? I believe that the problem was - and still is - that basic human dignity became buried under piles and piles of rules and rankings, rewards, and red flags.



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Looking back now, I don't think Teacher Tshe ring was a bad person. There were times when he invited students from distant areas, including me, to his home, and treated us to very nice meals during short school holidays when the students from the nearby town left for home. Sometimes we would insist that he sing a song for us during Sunday night meetings, and at our request, he would sing a relatively old Tibetan song that ends with a rap:

White flowers blossom on snow-capped mountains  
My mind is as pure as the snow  
Blue flowers blossom beside the riverbank  
My mind is as clear as the river  
*Cha cha cha!*

We would sing after him when he was rapping the *cha cha cha* part and burst into laughter simultaneously.

Also, one time, he was involved in a fight, and a drunkard knocked out four of his teeth. Our class went to see him in the hospital with some fruit and drinks. When we got there, we saw him surrounded by his mother, wife, and kids. He tried to sit up on his bed when he saw us and greeted us warmly. He was delighted to see us. His mother, just like any wonderful and compassionate mother, seemed very anxious. She told us to follow school rules while her son was in the hospital. Of course, she also knew that her son would get in trouble if our class did something that was outside the school rules. Before we left, our principle class monitor comforted the class teacher, "Take care. Don't worry about the class. I will take responsibility for them."

Teacher Tshe ring turned to his mother, and with tear-filled eyes, said, "This class has all the top students. It's a very good class."

Our class teacher was also under immense pressure to perform in certain ways: to become an exemplary teacher by submitting to school rules that are embedded in the Communist Party education system, both in the past, as well as in the present. After all, our class teacher and I were both under the shadow of an



authoritative school environment in somewhat different and yet similar ways. It was different because he had more power as a teacher, but similar because we were both expected to act as role models (I as a *banzhang* and he as a *banzhuren*).

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We had a math class on the same day our class teacher summoned me to his office. The class bell rang, and our class teacher came in holding a box of chalk in one hand and a math textbook in the other. As usual, he placed the textbook on the desk and walked around the desk rows once. Then he went back to the concrete stage in front of the class, looked around, focused on me, and said, "Huatse Gyal, get out of my math class. You are a bad influence on other students, just like a rotten apple in a box of good apples."

I stood up, looked him calmly in the eye, and then sat down again. He considered me quietly for a moment, drew a deep breath, and addressed himself to the class, "Today I will teach..." and launched into the day's lesson.

...

The tension between my class teacher and me did not escalate, although he never again called on me to inspect the students' dormitories. At the end of senior high school, two students in each class in our grade were awarded honorary certificates for being exemplary role models. All the class monitors in our grade except for me received awards. At least, I felt relieved and happy to be able to graduate in 2007. A conflict with a teacher like the one I had had could have ruined all my chances.

While it is true that I failed to live up to the expectations of being a model student, I lost the kind of desire and trust that I had had in elementary school - to become someone like Lei Feng. I had endured the trauma of the never-ending cycle of ritualized mistreatments and humiliations that oftentimes turn both teachers and students into voiceless, senseless objects of rules and rankings, rewards and red flags. This was the moment in my life when I desired to become someone as thoughtful and capable as Wise Rabbit in the Tibetan folktales that Grandmother had once told me. I aspired to find an educational environment where basic human dignity and




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human feelings would be respected, and where particular views would be cherished and personal circumstances appreciated. Who wouldn't?



WAITING FOR THE RETURN<sup>1</sup>

Rdo rje skyabs རྡོ་རྗེ་སྐལ་པ་

she ring, how many days has your father been away?"  
 "Father's been gone for twenty-one days," Tshe ring replied.

"Oh! Twenty-one days isn't a short time. It's time for him to return. I hope he comes back safely and quickly," Tshe ring's grandmother observed, and resumed chanting and spinning her old prayer wheel.

Spring had passed and now it was summer. Under the blue, windy summer sky, an enormous grassland was decorated with countless yaks and a few horses sprawled across the feet of mountains that varied dramatically in height.

This was Stobas ldan's homeland. A yak-hair tent pitched between two hills sheltered his family. It was the land where his ancestors had dwelt and where his descendants desired to live. From generation to generation, this was the land of O tho's clan. Moreover, O tho was Stobas ldan's family name. His full name was O tho Stobas ldan, but everyone called him Stobas ldan.

Stobas ldan, Tshe ring's father, was a strong, responsible man. At the age of eight, he had begun to learn how to hunt from his father. When he was ten, he began herding livestock. By the age of eighteen, his father was dead, and the next year he married and continued his father's life.

Time passed as quickly as flowing water and soon Stobas ldan had a ten-year-old son named Tshe ring. Everything Stobas ldan attempted he completed very nicely. His wife, his mother, and even the community members admired him.

One day a month earlier, when the sun had set behind the mountain, Rdor b+ha, the local leader, had come to Stobas ldan's home and shared dinner with his family. Announcing that he had something to say to Stobas ldan privately, he and Stobas ldan left the

<sup>1</sup> Rdo rje skyabs. 2017. Waiting for the Return. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 47: 262-267.



yak-hair tent. Tshe ring also went outside and herded the livestock into the yard where a Tibetan mastiff lay. The watchdog, as was its character, barked ferociously at Rdor b+ha. His breed was very loyal to their owners and protected the owner's family and the livestock at all times. But they were very cruel, even merciless, to strangers. No matter whether poor or rich, a leader or a common person, you knew to be careful around Tibetan mastiffs when you were in Tibet.

The community leader and Stobas ldan walked to a small hill far from Stobas ldan's tent to avoid the watchdog's frantic barking. Those living on this particular grassland had the custom that when they had something important and confidential to discuss, they went into the hills or somewhere far from their home to avoid the barking dogs and for privacy.

When they reached the hill, it was dark enough that stars shone brightly in the sky amid an overarching silence.

"Stobas ldan, I have something important to tell you," announced the community leader. "Our area is under attack. Our higher leaders ask every community to send two men to defend it."

"So..."

"Well, I have decided and I want you to join this battle," the leader said, interrupting Stobas ldan.

"Why? Why you and me?" Stobas ldan asked.

"I'm the community leader so I have the responsibility. You are the strongest person in this community, and I think you are also responsible," Rdor b+ha replied.

"If I say no..."

"Yes. You can say no, but think about your family, think about our ancestors, think about our next generation. We have lived on this land for generations. If we let it slip from our hands, where will we live? What would our next generation do? Everyone on this grassland must be accountable, especially men like you and me," answered the community leader.

Stobas ldan remained silent and gazed far into the distance. All was silence. A bit later, he turned, faced the leader, and asked forcefully, "When do we leave?"



"The day after tomorrow. According to the Tibetan calendar, that day is a good day," replied the community leader.

"OK, I'll go, but not because of you. It is for this land - for my homeland. And I want you to promise not to let my family know this," entreated Stobas ldan.

"I promise," the community leader agreed.

The next day, everything on the grassland was the same as usual. The turquoise sky was crystal clear above dense grass that swayed back and forth. Streams flowed softly. Livestock enjoyed their life on the grassland and birds flew freely and sang tunefully.

Stobas ldan got up early to burn incense and offer pure water to the deities. His wife finished milking, came back into the tent, and prepared breakfast. Tshe ring sat by his grandmother and listened to some of her many interesting stories. A bit later, the family gathered around the stove and had breakfast together. The sun began to rise above the eastern mountain. Soon it was warm and bright, another wonderful day on the grassland.

After the meal, Stobas ldan spoke to his family, "I have something to tell you. Rdor b+ha told me that there was important business to take care of and I must leave to work on it with him. You all do your usual work and don't worry about me."

"Really? Father, don't forget to buy some candies and toys for me," said Tshe ring hopefully.

"I won't forget, but I want you to help your mother do whatever needs to be done," Stobas ldan said, patting his son's head. "Listen to your mother and do whatever she says."

"Fine, I promise," Tshe ring responded immediately. Stobas ldan felt good about his obedient, agreeable son.

"How long will you be gone?" asked his wife.

"I'm not sure, but I guess not too long. Maybe several days will be enough," replied Stobas ldan.

"My dear son, I hope you return as quickly as you can. Wherever you go, home is the best place for you," his mother said before resuming her scripture chanting and spinning the old prayer wheel.



Stobas ldan nodded and said nothing. He didn't let his family know that he was going to fight. He did not want them to worry.

The next morning, the community leader came on horseback to Stobas ldan's tent. The watchdog barked loudly. Stobas ldan was already prepared and quickly mounted his best horse with his rifle slung across his back. They rode away before dawn. The only observer of their departure was the watchdog.

As the sun rose the next morning, Tshe ring's mother woke him and gave him breakfast before sending him off to herd the livestock. From that day, he herded in his father's absence. He took the yaks to pastures where fresh grass grew and sometimes drove them to streams to drink. He had good herding skills because he had often herded with his father. Though he was still a child, he could herd almost as well as his father.

Time passed, as it always does, without a pause. They woke up every day to find a new day had already begun. Tshe ring herded and sometimes grazed the yaks on the mountains. From the mountain height, he gazed far into the distance, hoping to see his father returning. He dreamt every night that his father was returning with candies and various toys, but dreams are just dreams and not the substance of reality.

Tshe ring's grandmother said little. She continued to chant scriptures while rotating her prayer wheel, hoping in her heart that her son would soon return. Since her husband had died, her son was everything to her. She waited for him in the same way that Tshe ring waited for his father. They both lived for his return.

Another also waited for Stobas ldan's return - Tshe ring's mother. A very diligent wife and mother, she got up every morning before anyone else, milked the yaks, and then cooked breakfast. The rest of her day was filled with many chores, including collecting yak dung, carrying water long distances to their tent, and putting young livestock in the livestock enclosure.

After breakfast one day, she suddenly thought it has been a long time since her husband had left for "business." But being busy with chores she couldn't remember exactly how long he had been



gone. She asked, "Tshe ring, how many days has your father been away?"

"Today is the twenty-first day," Tshe ring replied with absolute assurance. He remembered it clearly because he was urgently hoping for his father's return.

His grandmother exclaimed, "Oh! Twenty-one days! That's not a short time. It's time for him to return. I hope he comes back safely and quickly." Then she resumed chanting and turning the old prayer wheel.

Tshe ring went to herd the yaks as usual. He again climbed the mountain and gazed into the distance, wishing for his father's return. He thought, "Today is the twenty-first day. It is not a short time. Why hasn't he returned?"

At dusk, Tshe ring followed his livestock home. As usual, Tshe ring's mother prepared supper in the tent. He sat by his grandmother and asked her to tell a story.

Suddenly, the watchdog barked. Tshe ring's mother asked him to investigate. Tshe ring went out and looked in the direction of the barks. Something indistinct was on the side of West Mountain. It was too far away to see clearly.

"Mother, there is something blurry at the foot of West Mountain!" he yelled.

His mother and grandmother came outside together. Tshe ring pointed with his finger. Not able to see clearly, his grandmother asked Tshe ring, "Is it your father?"

"I can't see clearly. It's too far away," he answered, "but it's moving toward our tent."

His mother put one hand to her forehead and squinted.


They stood side by side near the tent and watched the black spot hopefully. Several minutes later, as the black spot came nearer, they could see it was a man on a horse, but they could not identify him. The sun was now behind the mountain. It was quickly getting darker. Still, they stood, waiting.

As the rider got closer, the watchdog barked more loudly and ferociously.



FAITH, FAITH, FAITH<sup>1</sup>

Pad+ma skyabs པདྨ་སྐུ་མཁའ་

he monastery had been just a haphazard collection of a few old, dilapidated buildings a few years earlier and then things began to change. The monastery now boasted a brilliant shrine, a large meeting hall, a *ma Ni* meeting hall, and a towering temple building. It seemed the monastery monks were competing to see who could erect the grandest building. Indeed, Reincarnation Bla ma 'Brong lived in a building bigger and taller than all the others. In his fifties and though hair sprouted profusely from his neck, he was nearly bald. Locals commented that his big, thick ears indicated he was a pandita and believed his former incarnation had been a renowned hermit who had displayed awesome supernatural powers.

Most locals sincerely believed in Bla ma 'Brong who often said, "Life in this world is never peaceful." This seemed true because he had heard that another monk in another monastery had declared himself to be his previous incarnation's embodiment. Bla ma 'Brong worried about this until the "imposter" died, whereupon Bla ma 'Brong led a less stressed life.

A large tribe of utterly devoted Buddhists lived near the monastery all spring if there was adequate grass for their livestock. These tribal members included Mgon skyid and her daughter, Klu sgron, who regularly took yogurt and milk to Bla ma 'Brong in the hope of having better future lives.

A river with many bobbing ice cakes flowed near the monastery one spring. This undulating line of water and ice resembled a serpent when viewed from a mountaintop.

One morning, as cuckoos twittered from the branches to welcome spring's arrival, Klu sgron got up and announced she had a toothache.

<sup>1</sup> Pad+ma skyabs. 2017. Faith, Faith, Faith. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 47:268-276.



"Well, it can't be very serious. You didn't complain about it yesterday. Go with our neighbor, Bkra shis, and sell the wool your father collected yesterday from our sheep," counseled her mother.

"Yes, Mother," Klu sgron said, and went outside to wait for Bkra shis.

About an hour later, she was staring enviously at the wool sweater a young Chinese woman was wearing and with embarrassment exclaimed, "Chinese Sister, how beautiful your sweater is! What material is it made of?"

The Chinese woman sneered, raised her hand, pointed to the wool piled up like a hill on a truck behind her, and said, "Over there. It's made of wool."

Klu sgron looked at the clean, colorful, and attractive sweater again. The wool she had sold was mixed with dust. Looking at the wool sweater again, she said doubtfully, "Uh... Chinese Sister is joking."

The Chinese woman had given her 200 *yuan* for the wool. After counting the money, Klu sgron went home with Bkra shis, thinking, "Mother will give one hundred *yuan* to the Vajrapani Temple and donate one hundred *yuan* to our reincarnation *bla ma*, who will visit each family this month. But I'm sure she will still borrow one hundred *yuan* for Bla ma O's consecration."

As she was walking home, the image of that beautiful wool sweater flashed repeatedly in her mind.

When she arrived, her mother took the 200 *yuan* without comment and asked, "How is your tooth?"

"It still hurts," Klu sgron said.

Her mother took out a picture of Bla ma 'Brong, leaned it against a small stone, and said, "You will be cured after prostrating to this picture one hundred times. Dear, take this yogurt to Bla ma after you finish your prostrations and ask him about your toothache. Maybe we'll need to invite some monks to chant."

Feeling a bit tired after hurriedly finishing her prostrations, Klu sgron rested for a few moments, took off her old sheepskin robe, put on a thin brown robe, and started down the zigzag path leading to



the monastery. Sunshine bounced off the mountains under a cloudless blue sky. She felt better.

Bla ma 'Brong was getting out of bed when Klu sgron entered his chambers. After she prostrated three times, she told him all the details of her toothache. She was seventeen and not very beautiful. However, pert breasts, large eyes, and smooth lips made her attractive. Bla ma 'Brong gazed at her breasts and thought, "It's been too long since I engaged in my secrets," and then ordered Klu sgron to approach him. As he got ready to investigate her toothache, he held her cheeks warmly and said, "Open your mouth."

Klu sgron opened her mouth and closed her eyes...

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After a bowl of *rtsam pa* and a piece of fried bread for breakfast, Bla ma 'Brong still felt a bit hungry and began eating the yogurt Klu sgron had brought. While eating, he picked up a newspaper and scanned it. A story entitled *A Teabowl* caught his eye:

Don grub was an intelligent, wise man who easily solved difficult problems. If two men, for example, quarreled over a horse, he could determine who the horse's real owner was.

One lovely summer afternoon, sunshine splashed through the windows onto the tables in an office where Don grub sat in a chair pondering something important. Smoke entered his mouth and then slithered out from his nostrils like a black serpent. Sudden loud knocking at the door roused him from his meditations. Two monks entered, looked at each other angrily with dark-red faces, and said simultaneously, "Great Teacher! This..."

"Wait! Wait! I don't know who is right if you both speak at the same time," said Don grub. He pointed to the monk on his right and said, "You go first."

The monk adjusted his cassock on his shoulder and said, "Great Teacher! Tshul khrims came to my home last night. I offered him butter tea in my silver tea bowl. He said, 'It's so beautiful,' and looked at it longingly again and again. In fact, I didn't want to sell it for even 2,000 *yuan*. We talked for a long time. During that time, I had to go out and pee. Tshul khrims was gone when I came back. When I got up this



morning and wanted to drink a bowl of tea I discovered that my tea bowl was also gone. I looked for it everywhere in my home, but I didn't find it. You know, for a monk like me, I should find it in my room, but I didn't. Only Tshul khrims came to my room yesterday. When I politely asked him about the missing bowl, he angrily said, 'How unjust. We should go to court.' Great Teacher! Just think! How can I, a cassock-wearing monk lie?" Then he unhappily looked at the other monk, signaling that it was his turn.

The other monk emitted a short cough and began, "I went to Bkra shis's room, drank tea, and praised his tea bowl. This is all true. But it's not true that I took his tea bowl when I left. How could I do something like that as a cassock-wearing monk? This is why we are here. Please make a correct decision. *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM, oM ma Ni pad+me hUM...*"

"Ha!" Don grub stood and said, "This happened between you two. For me it's easy! "

The two monks looked at Don grub's face in surprise. "In fact, this is a very easy question, but we don't know what punishment to give the thief. I'll give you a good way to identify the thief."

Bkra shis said, "Tshul khrims stole my tea bowl."

Tshul khrims responded, "I vow by The Three Jewels that I didn't steal it."

Now forced to demonstrate his mysterious ability, Don grub stood up, closed the door, pulled the window curtains shut, and took an object wrapped in yellow cloth from his desk. It was a sculpture about thirty-five millimeters in height.

Forgetting their enmity, the two monks looked at each other in surprise.

Don grub said, "This is a real Buddha. You two must make an oath and touch this to the top of your head. The liar will leave this world in three days. Understand this if you still want to live."

He had resolved many different issues using this procedure. Don grub sincerely believed in this Buddha image and was confident he could quickly resolve this affair.

Bkra shis put the Buddha image on top of his head without hesitation and swore, "I will surely die in three days and then be reborn



in Hell if I really stole Tshul khrims's tea bowl."

Tshul khrims vowed, "I must go to Hell in three days if Bkra shis didn't steal my tea bowl."

Don grub was amazed and said, "After three days the innocent will still live in this world and the sinner will be in Hell."

Then the two left, puzzled that such methods were being used to identify the guilty party.

Three days flew by and the two monks returned to Don grub, who was very surprised. He thought hard. His mysterious ability had evaporated. He hopelessly said, "A tea bowl has no value. Go home."

"Hmph!" Bla ma 'Brong exclaimed, when he finished reading the story, and thought, "Don grub isn't very clever."

Suddenly, he remembered that Stobs ldan had invited him to his father's funeral. He put the bowl of yogurt down and was soon walking on a path, carrying several volumes of scriptures.

Stobs ldan was honest and his family was the richest in the village. "You aren't honest, you're a fool," his father had often said. "Helping others is expensive! Don't waste your money!"

Nevertheless, Stobs ldan helped others if he was able, ignoring his father's injunction.

When Bla ma 'Brong reached his destination, Stobs ldan said, "Lord, I regret that I am an unfilial son and couldn't serve my father well while he was living, but my heart is calm today for you have come to chant for Father. Please, bless Father's soul so he will be reborn in this world or in Western Paradise."

"Don't worry. I have a way to ensure your father will be reborn in this world. You will see him again," Bla ma 'Brong assured and began chanting.

On her way back home, Klu sgron realized something had happened when she saw many people gathered at Stobs ldan's home. She soon realized that it was a funeral. A moment later, her cheeks turned as red as apples when she caught sight of Bla ma 'Brong. She rushed home in embarrassment.

Locals were preoccupied with the funeral and ignored her.



When she got home, her mother had dinner ready. Mgon skyid said, "Daughter, is your tooth okay? What did our benefactor, Bla ma 'Brong, say?"

"Oh! my tooth is no longer painful," she replied.

"What did he say about it?" Mgon skyid insisted.

"Oh... he didn't say anything. He just puffed into my mouth," Klu sgron murmured, afraid to reveal what had really happened.

Later, she no longer wanted to take yogurt to Bla ma 'Brong, but her mother angrily insisted, "Daughter, this is our honor. If we do this for a *bla ma* in this life, we should be glad. We will be punished by the deities if you continue to cling to such a wrong, foolish attitude."

...

A year passed as quickly as water moves in a fast-flowing river. The mountain peaks were light-yellow, resembling a Russian beauty's hair. Grass and leaves blew aimlessly in the wind as the local herders drove their livestock to the winter camp.

"Mutton is for monks in autumn, yogurt is for brides in autumn," goes a local saying. Indeed, monks did wait for mutton and milk. Some monks put on a big smile and welcomed those they saw coming with a heavy bag along the path to the monastery.

Most visitors asked, "Does Bla ma 'Brong live here?" When the answer was negative, they kept walking, while the disappointed monks pretended to have come out simply to urinate. When they re-entered their domestic quarter, their smiles had evaporated.

Bla ma 'Brong enjoyed his many gifts but, sometimes odd things occurred. One beautiful morning, Bla ma noticed Klu sgron was pregnant. Hardly able to believe his eyes he inquired, "Are you pregnant?"

Klu sgron bowed her head, her face seemingly illuminated by bright lumps of coal glowing in a fire.

"Who is your baby's father?" Bla ma 'Brong demanded.

Her bright eyes looked at him once, coyly. She remained silent.

"Did you tell others about this?" Bla ma 'Brong asked.

"Nobody," Klu sgron uttered quietly.



"Good. Keep our secret in your heart forever. I will create a good destiny for the baby," Bla ma 'Brong promised.

"The government is strict about birth limits and my family is poor. Mother often asks me about the baby's father. She wants the father to live in our home. If he refuses, we will give the baby to him after it is born," Klu sgron said, tears trickling down her cheeks.

Bla ma 'Brong gently moved the prayer beads around his left wrist and said, "Go home. Tell your mother to come and see me."

Bla ma 'Brong scowled, scrunching the wrinkles on his forehead, but a moment later an idea occurred to him and his eyes glinted contentedly. He unconsciously murmured, "That's right." He had recalled that Stobs ldan had entrusted him to identify his father's reincarnation.

"You needn't worship. Don't do that," he said when Mgon skyid got ready to prostrate upon her arrival. "What's your plan for your daughter?" he asked.

"I'm hoping to receive guidance from you, Lord Bla ma," Mgon skyid declared.

"How fortunate that the baby is the reincarnation of a wealthy man. I will locate and identify him and he will help your family when he is an adult. Don't ask her who the baby's father is. She might commit suicide or do something rash if you pressure her. She is young and very timid. What would you do if she really did commit suicide? It would then seem as though you had taken two lives - the girl's and her unborn infant's."

"Lord Bla ma, how true. What would I do if I lost my daughter?" Mgon skyid sighed and quickly made three prostrations to Bla ma 'Brong.

The Bla ma suggested, "This business will go better if you don't talk about it to others."

...

Spring came as it always does. It was the anniversary of the death of Stobs ldan's father. Visiting the monastery, Stobs ldan gave each monk one hundred *yuan* and 1,000 *yuan* to Bla ma 'Brong. While prostrating to Bla ma 'Brong, he lamented, "My dear father has gone



to another world. Already one year has passed. He often appears in my dreams. Where has his soul been reborn?"

Bla ma 'Brong closed his eyes, moved his beads in his hands, and then proclaimed after a few moments, "Indeed! I promised you that he would be reborn in our village as a boy."

Stobs ldan's only reaction was to open his mouth wide for a second and then clasp his hands above his heart as a sign of devotion to Bla ma 'Brong, who kept his beads moving.

Bla ma 'Brong intoned, "Your father was reborn in Mgon skyid's family. The child's name is Chos skyong."

Two years later, Stobs ldan took Mgon skyid's family with him to the monastery to circumambulate and worship. When Bla ma 'Brong saw Chos skyong looking at a painting on the wall of the meeting hall, he went near and said warmly, "Good boy, I'll give you a lot of candy if you tell Uncle Stobs ldan that the beads around his neck belong to you. If you don't do this, you are a bad boy and I'll give you nothing."

Eager to get the candy, Chos skyong approached Uncle Stobs ldan and said, "You are wearing my prayer beads!"

"Oh, The Three Jewels! Chos skyong is my father's soul, isn't he? He surely recognizes his beads," exclaimed Stobs ldan. He took the beads from around his neck, presented them to Chos skyong, and embraced him warmly.

Startled, Klu sgron now believed that each *bla ma* had his own way to save sinners from darkness, but mere mortals often just didn't realize it. Klu sgron regretted that she had ever questioned Bla ma 'Brong.




## A POWERFUL GHOST

'Jam dbyangs bkra shis འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

I was born in 1994 in Ldong nge (Dongwei) Village, Mdo ba (Duowa) Township, Reb gong (Tongren) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. I heard many folk stories from my maternal grandfather (Chos lo, b. 1940). He told me stories every night before we slept. Neighboring children came to listen to Grandfather's stories. Sometimes he told stories that lasted very late into the night and my parents would then ask us to stop. I heard many stories, but when I was thirteen, I left home and seldom returned. When I did return, every family had a television and nobody was interested in folk stories. Instead, children liked to watch television. I forgot almost all the stories that Grandfather had told me.

In October 2017, I asked Grandfather to tell me a story and he told me this story. He said he also had forgotten many stories because he had not told them for a long time.

...

 am Gsol ston mgo gzur from Rma chu wa ma. There are more than twenty households in my community. My family is the poorest. I steal yaks and sheep from others. My life has depended on stealing since my parents died when I was a child, leaving me an orphan. I had nothing to eat, so I started stealing things in order to live. I have been a thief almost my whole life. When I was in my twenties, I married a woman younger than me. My family is poor, but we haven't been hungry because I am a thief.

I stole a female yak from the Ser Family, the richest family in my community. I drove the yak to my enclosure. My wife helped me tie it so it couldn't move. Then we tied its mouth shut to suffocate it. The yak tried to move so I tied her feet together. After a while, the yak stopped moving. My wife handed me my sword and I butchered the yak. We cooked some meat and ate it.

The next morning, the rich family guessed the thief was in our camp. Each of their three sons asked the local people in turn if they could search their tents. Everyone agreed because the Ser Family was



rich and the sons were cruel. Not a single family dared object. Those sons searched each tent one by one.

I knew they would kill me because they didn't like me and I had no relatives in the community. I told my wife to cook more meat. When the sons arrived, I asked them to sit, but they insisted on searching. They cruelly exclaimed, "We will kill you!"

"Okay, but please let us have some food first," I said and again asked them to sit and have some meat with me. After eating, they tied me up and stuck a sword in my chest. I didn't die immediately. My *rnam shes* 'spirit' tried to leave my body, but I couldn't leave my wife alone, so my spirit refused to leave.

Every evening, I visited my wife and brought her food. A month passed. One night, my sworn brother heard I had died and came to my home. "I am Gsol ston mgo gzur's sworn brother. My name is Skya dga'. I heard that my sworn brother was killed, so I came to visit. I brought a horse with a saddlebag of butter. This butter is for making lamps and the horse is repayment for the money he lent me years ago."

"Okay, but he will come soon so you can tell him yourself," my wife said.

Skya dga' was confused. He thought she had gone mad because she worried so much about my death, but he didn't utter a word.

Night arrived. Just as my wife and Skya dga' were ready to have dinner, they heard a strong wind outside. My wife announced, "He's here!"

I had arrived. Skya dga' immediately stood up.

"When did you get here my sworn brother?" I asked.

"I got here this afternoon," Skya dga' said.

"Great! Tonight, there is no special food for you, but stay here and tomorrow night we will cook meat," I said.

"Okay," Skya dga' replied.

I then said I was going to leave and walked backward because most people are scared when they see my back. There is neither skin nor bones on my back. Everything inside my upper body is visible.



Skya dga' said he wasn't afraid but I didn't let him look and then I left. I had no specific place to stay so I wandered here and there.

The next night I brought a whole sheep carcass back home. My wife cooked it. Skya dga' and my wife ate the boiled mutton. I told Skya dga' to put some meat on the fire. Although I couldn't eat it, I could taste the odor, which filled my belly. Skya dga' and I chatted for a while before he asked, "How it is possible that you have come back?"

I told him that I couldn't leave because my wife was alone. "If I don't come back, the camp people will bully her," I explained.

The next morning Skya dga' declared that he was going to leave.

I gave him a piece of *phrug lwa* 'woolen cloth', and said "I didn't pay for my horse when I bought it. Please tell the *rgyal sman pa* to come to Rma me tog thang<sup>1</sup> on the fourteenth day of the seventh month. I will pay him for the horse then."

On his way back home, Skya dga' visited one of his father's friends. He stayed there that afternoon. They ate meat and noodles. A man around thirty years old was there. Carefully looking at Skya dga's woolen cloth he asked, "Where did you get it?"

Skya dga' replied that it was a gift from me, and added that he would return it if it I had stolen it.

The man fearfully protested, "No! No! No! We can't take it. If we do, bad things will happen to our family. A few days ago, the Ser Family's three sons died while enjoying themselves near the Yellow River. We all understand that Gsol ston mgo gzur has become a demon. He can even set fire to damp, green grassland. He has many powers and can kill anyone.

"It was a sunny day when the three brothers were having fun. Then suddenly, a flash flood swept them away. Their family couldn't even retrieve their corpses. Whoever sees Gsol ston mgo gzur either dies immediately or horrible things happen to them."

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<sup>1</sup> A location near the Yellow River.



I stole fifty horses that I took to Rma me tog thang on the fourteenth day of the seventh month. When the *rgyal sman pa* arrived, Skya dga' gave him half of the horses. Afterward, there was a lot of gossip about me. Some people saw me riding a horse and holding a spear covered in flames. It was a weapon to hurt my next victim. The villagers could see flames in my mouth and eyes.

Those who scolded or gossiped about me would suddenly have an accident. Many people died, many livestock were burned, and many families' belongings were burned.

Locals asked Bla ma Wa shes mgo dkar to exorcize me, but he couldn't.

I made a spear out of a very large tree and said, "Hey, old *bla ma*! I am Gsol ston mgo gzur. If you want to exorcize me, you must first catch this spear. Now come for me!" and then I shot the spear at the top of a mountain behind the monastery. The *bla ma* moved a bit and didn't get hurt, but part of his house was destroyed by my spear.

Next, I took a huge stone, heated it until it became red hot, shot it at the *bla ma*, shouting, "I am warning you, do not try to exorcize me!"

That boulder struck another part of the *bla ma*'s house which also collapsed. The *bla ma* could do nothing.

Some local leaders then went to Bla brang Monastery and told Bla ma Kun mkhyen, the monastery leader, the problem and asked him for help. Bla ma Kun mkhyen said, "I will exorcize him, but don't tell anyone I'm coming. It must be a secret, otherwise, I cannot exorcize him."

The visitors returned home. Nobody said that the *bla ma* was coming.

After a few days, the *bla ma* arrived. Locals pitched a white tent near the Yellow River. The *bla ma* told the villagers to watch their horses and livestock carefully. Then the *bla ma* said, "I invited Gsol ston mgo gzur. I amicably talked with him, and he agreed to come. When he arrived, the sky became very dark. It rained heavily, and there was thunder. Gsol ston mgo gzur was covered with flames. We discussed putting an end to hurting local people. He said that if he stopped, then all of you should meet his conditions. Each local



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person should chant 10,000 mantras each year, and fast once a year. We agreed to this."

The next day at sunrise, all the villagers gathered near Bla ma Kun mkhyen's tent. The *bla ma* asked the villagers if they would keep this promise. Everyone promised they would.

I then cautioned, "People easily change their minds. If you break your vow, even after thousands of years, I will return."

Everyone clearly heard what I said, though they couldn't see me. Afterward, I stopped making trouble and didn't appear until after the Cultural Revolution when I appeared once. A family's grassland caught fire one day, and the villagers tried to put it out, but it took a long time. This happened at a time when many people didn't believe in Buddhas or that ghosts existed. After the fire was extinguished, a man said, "If Buddha and ghosts exist, then Gsol ston mgo gzur, where have you been? If you exist, show a sign!"

Suddenly there was a fire in the forest on the mountain on the other side of the Yellow River. A flame shot through a group of people who were resting near the Yellow River. They started running onto the frozen ice, but fire appeared on the ice and about thirty people died.

After that, the villagers started chanting and fasting again, and there were no more such incidents.




## A DEMON MONK

'Jam dbyangs bkra shis འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

When I asked Grandfather to tell me a story in March of 2017, he said he had forgotten many stories because he had not told stories for a long time, and then he told me this one.

...

 once went to Lha sa with a group of around twenty people. We packed food and other belongings on yaks. All my group mates hired *lag rdo* 'paid helpers' and so they didn't have to worry about driving yaks, cooking, and packing their belongings on yaks. The paid helpers did all of that. They did everything for them, but I was different. I did everything by myself because my family members didn't come with me and I didn't hire a *lag rdo*. Sometimes my group mates jokingly called me *ser sna can* 'miser', but I ignored them. Actually, I couldn't afford to hire a *lag rdo*.

In the early morning, we started off on foot. Before dark, we stopped, pitched our tents, tied the yaks, cooked a meal, ate, and then we went to bed.

One evening, having stopped and rested because we were all very tired, I cooked for myself and promptly fell asleep after eating. A bit later, one of my mates woke me saying, "You should collect your yaks."

My yaks were nearby. When I reached them, I saw an old monk sitting by a smoky fire. I greeted him and asked where he was going.

He said he had been going to Lha sa with some friends, but some days earlier his feet had become very painful and he couldn't continue. His friends had then left him. He said, "It's very hard for me to move. I'm hungry and thirsty."

Seeing that his feet were swollen, I offered to help and carried him on my back to where we were camped. My group members were naturally curious about who he was and what had happened to him.

Some whispered to each other, "He doesn't have a *lag rdo* so how can he take care of a sick man?"



After making a fire I gave the old monk *rtsam pa* 'roasted barley flour', which we had with black tea, and then we went to bed.

The next morning when we got up, he announced that his feet had recovered and then he didn't let me cook or do any other work. He was grateful that I had saved his life when he was as good as dead on the way to Lha sa. He now loaded the yaks in the morning and cooked every evening and morning insisting that I do nothing.

From then on, I chanted scriptures, ate on time, slept on time, and sometimes we chatted about how monks and laymen led different lives. My mates admired me for having found such a good friend, some observing, "You are so lucky to have such a good friend. Now, you don't need to do anything. You have no difficulties now."

I agreed that I was very happy.

A month later, we reached a herding area where we rested and camped for the night. My group mates were discussing something, but I didn't pay attention. However, my monk friend went with them. After a while, he came to me saying they were going to buy yogurt.

"We shouldn't buy yogurt. We don't have much money," I confessed.

Assuring me that this wasn't a problem the monk then left, shortly after returning with a wooden bucket full of yogurt.

"Where did you get such delicious yogurt?" I asked, but he provided no details as to how or where he got it.

That afternoon and then every day, he asked me to do nothing but keep up with him. Several days later, we reached another herding area and my group members discussed buying sheep. I told my friend, "They have enough money to buy mutton, but we don't, so let's not eat meat."

But the monk thought that perhaps he could get a sheep for us, and after leaving soon returned with a sheep.

When I asked how he got such a big, fat sheep he simply replied, "I got it easily."

We slaughtered the sheep and cooked the meat. Some mates came over as we were cooking and we ate together. They were surprised that we had such a fat sheep. Again they joked, "You are very lucky to have made such a friend!"



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I replied, "I was really lucky to save his life."

As months passed I realized that there was something unusual about my friend. He was different. He often got things easily but it was unclear where these things came from or how he procured them. He had managed to get the yogurt from somewhere and when my group mates bought sheep, he got a sheep for free from somewhere. I was happy because he could help us, but I was surprised how he was able to do such things. My mind was full of questions.

At night when he slept, the old monk used a big quilt made of sheep wool which I'd brought from home while I slept in my sheepskin robe. We pitched a small tent and I slept in the tent, but he slept near the yaks, ensuring that they were safe.

One night after we had eaten and I had made my bed, he took the quilt. I peered at him from under the tent. He lay for a while in his bed and looked around at our group members. When he thought all were sleeping, he slowly and silently got up and left. After a bit, he came back with something. To my horror, I realized it was a human corpse. I watched as he lay in his bed and ate the entire corpse. I could hear the sound as he crunched the bones. I trembled in fear and could hardly breathe.

The next morning at breakfast I chatted, as usual, pretending to know nothing about him eating the corpse.

It was summer. A few days after that night, we came near a herding area. A family had just arrived and pitched a yak hair tent. Yaks and sheep were around their tent. A river and a small hill were near the yaks. We couldn't see the other side of the hill, but we could see the family enjoying a meal. We were also ready to rest and cook.

My friend left and when I looked for him, I saw him riding a *mdzo mo*<sup>1</sup> into the distance. The *mdzo mo* tried to run away from the yaks. It seemed to want to return to its former pasture where the family lived in winter. A girl ran after the *mdzo mo* and called, "*Dgo dgo dgo*."<sup>2</sup> The *mdzo mo* then turned and ran at the girl. She tried to run away, but the *mdzo mo* gored her in the belly.

She died.

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<sup>1</sup> An offspring of a cow and a yak.

<sup>2</sup> Vocables to call yaks.



I saw the old monk on the back of the *mdzo mo* with the girl's corpse go behind a hill. Only I saw my friend take the corpse. In the place where the girl was killed, there was a corpse that seemed to be the girl. Her parents and family members wailed and took it back to their tent.

A bit later, the old monk came back and we had a meal together. Realizing he was not human, I was very afraid of him and didn't know what to do.

After that, I did whatever he asked me to do. I couldn't sleep well at night. During the daytime, I fell asleep while walking with my group members who asked, "What is wrong with you? Are you ill?"

They worried about me, but I didn't tell them the truth because I was afraid of the monk.

Some days later, the old monk said, "Do you understand that I'm not a real person?"

Fearfully, I mumbled, "Yes."

"Great! Don't worry! You saved my life after I got ill and all my friends left me. I won't hurt you. Don't say anything about me to anyone in our group," he cautioned.

I still couldn't sleep at night.

More months passed and we had become very familiar with each other. My fear had almost vanished, but not completely.

When we got near Lha sa, we discussed where we should leave the yaks as well as our quilts, pots, kettles, and so on. My mates had located some local families, paid some money, and left their yaks and belongings with them. I said, "A khu 'Monk,' shall we find a family to keep our yaks, quilts, and other items?"

"Don't worry, I've already found one," he responded and then asked me to separate the things we needed to take with us to Lha sa and the things we should leave behind.

After I had done this he disappeared somewhere with the yaks and things I wanted to leave. He returned in the evening and we had supper.

The next morning, he got up early announcing, "I am going to ask a family to let us stay with them until we leave. You go with the other group members."



That evening he located a family who agreed we could stay with them until we were ready to leave. My other mates also found places to stay. After dinner, my friend explained, "I have tried to worship the Buddha Shakyamuni in Lha sa, but I failed each time because I suddenly got ill. On the way this time, I cooked and helped you pack your belongings on the yaks. I didn't let you do anything. Now you should help me worship Buddha Shakyamuni."

I readily agreed.

"After reaching Lha sa, we must worship Buddha," he said.

The next morning, we went to worship and entered the temple with the Buddha Shakyamuni. When we were in front of Buddha Shakyamuni, my friend suddenly turned and said, "If you want to worship, you go ahead, but I don't want to."

I grabbed him, but he pulled away and left the temple. I stayed to worship Buddha Shakyamuni.

My friend was cooking when I got back to where we were staying. He seemed sad but said nothing. After we finished our meal, he took a long breath, and said, "I thought you could help me worship, but it seems hopeless. Can you try again tomorrow?"

I replied, "I certainly will!"

The next morning, we got up early and went to worship Buddha Shakyamuni. When we arrived in front of the Buddha image, the old monk's face darkened and again he declared, "I'm not going to worship this Buddha."

I angrily pulled out my walking stick from my belt, beat his head, and shouted, "Why did you try to come here several times before? It was to worship Buddha Shakyamuni!" I then forced him to bow down. Once his head had touched Buddha's knee, he could worship.

When we later returned to where we were staying, he warmly thanked me and said he was very happy. After some discussion, we decided that all our group members would go to worship the Dalai Lama the next day, but my friend said, "I won't worship that old *bla ma*. You go, but when you leave, don't take anything from him, not even if it is as small as a needle."



"I won't take anything from the holy Dalai Lama. I'm just going to worship him. I also don't think he will give me anything."

We got up early the next morning and after breakfast, we all except my friend went to worship the holy Dalai Lama. While we were worshipping, he gave us each a red silk thread to put around our necks to stop sickness and repel evil. After we finished worshipping, we returned to our camp.

When I was almost back, my friend angrily shouted, "What are you bringing with you? I told you not to take anything from that *bla ma*, but you brought something!"

I fearfully replied, "I didn't take anything from the *bla ma*."

"What are you wearing around your neck?" he demanded.

I then remembered what the *bla ma* had given me, took off the thread, and threw it away. We then had dinner.

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Another evening after we had worshipped Buddha several times, we discussed shopping and returning home. My friend asked how much money I had.

I replied, "I have 200 coins."

"Tomorrow use one or two coins for the things you want to buy. Bargain! Don't pay the full price!" said my friend.

The next morning, I went to the Bar skor<sup>1</sup> and bargained with the merchants there. After making purchases, I returned to our camp and told my friend what I had done. After dinner, I went to bed but he left. At about midnight, I heard a loud sound. It seemed something huge had fallen near me.

Next morning when I woke up, I saw all the things that I had paid for the day before and more. I was surprised that I now had many things. I was especially surprised that there were expensive things among them.

"How will we take these things to where our yaks are?" I asked.

"Don't worry! You don't need to take anything. I'll take all of them," he said.

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<sup>1</sup> A busy market area in Lha sa.



After lunch, all the group members returned to the yaks. My friend tied all our things together and carried them on his back. That evening, when we reached our yaks, my mates asked each to check their yaks. Some said that they had lost some. Then a group member came over and suggested, "You should check your yaks and the things you own because we've lost some of ours."

My friend then said, "I'm going to drive our pack yaks here," and after a while, he returned with them. We had lost nothing. In fact, my yaks seemed stronger than before.

Curious, I asked him where he had kept them.

"I asked Gnyan chen thang lha<sup>1</sup> to protect them until we returned," he revealed.

We were all amazed.

One day on the way home, my friend began talking, "Maybe you think that these things are enough for your whole life, but they aren't. Holy Bla ma Ser khan chen is in Dpal nalanda. If you worship that holy *bla ma*, it's very good for you and your future life. He has the power to grant both good health and good conditions to those who come and worship him."

"OK, I'll go with you," I conceded hesitantly. Actually, I didn't want to go. I was afraid of him. My goal had been to go on pilgrimage to Lha sa and I had already achieved that. Now I wanted to go home. Nevertheless, I asked my mates to drive my yaks home adding, "Please tell my family members that I went to Dpal nalanda to worship a holy *bla ma* and after that, I will come back."

They tried to stop me, "You are lucky to have such a good friend. You had the good luck to worship the holy Dalai Lama and Buddha Shakyamuni. It is now better to go home."

I didn't listen because I was afraid of the old monk.

Eventually, my mates agreed to drive my pack yaks back home and then I left with the old monk. After some days, we reached a huge grassland without forests and mountains. My friend said, "We'll stay here tonight. Tomorrow, you will go to the monastery. It's not far from here. I will not worship the *bla ma* there, but it is very good if

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<sup>1</sup> A mountain deity.



you worship him. Afterward, you should return home. One day you will be poor. There is a place called Mthe bo'i long pa.<sup>1</sup> Go there and find Mthe bo'i drag dmar<sup>2</sup> and call me. I will help you."

The next morning after breakfast, he gave me a monk's blouse and skirt saying, "Wear them and then nobody will hurt you or try to steal from you. They will think you are a monk and there is nothing to steal from a monk."

I donned these clothes and left him. I knew he was not a real person and I remained afraid of him. Still, I felt sad when we parted, and he also seemed sad. We had been traveling together for a long time and had established a deep relationship.

That night, I got to a bridge and slept under it. Early the next morning, I heard bells tinkling that signaled a *bla ma* was nearby. When a *bla ma* traveled, his riding mule had bells on its harness. I climbed onto the bridge and soon met a monk and a *bla ma*. The *bla ma* looked at me and asked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I am a pilgrim going to Dpal nalanda. I heard of holy Bla ma Ser mkhan chen. I'm going there to worship him," I replied.

"Oh, I am Bla ma Ser mkhan chen. A family has invited me to come and chant for a sick person in their home so I'm going there. When a *bla ma* goes somewhere to chant scriptures, two monks accompany him, but today only one monk is with me. Can you come with me?"

I agreed to go.

"It's OK if you cannot chant scripture. Just help me do the fire offering," the *bla ma* said.

From there we went to the home of the sick person. The family was clearly very rich. A young man lay in bed and looked seriously ill. I was surprised to see my friend, the old monk, sitting by the sick man. Nobody could see him except me. He gestured to me to say nothing to the others and tried to care for the sick man. When the old monk stayed silently by the sick man, he seemed to suffer less.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of a place in Kan lho (Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

<sup>2</sup> The name of a rocky mountain.



Then the *bla ma* said, "What should I do?" and then a bit later he said, "I'll do a ritual exorcism."

He put a box used to catch evils near the sick man and chanted something several times. I saw my friend, the old monk, pulled into the box, which the holy *bla ma* closed while chanting, and then he sealed it with melted wax from a candle. The *bla ma* handed the box to me and said, "Dig a very deep hole in front of the tent and throw this inside."

Some men dug a very deep hole, but when I was ready to throw it into the hole, my friend called to me from the box and pleaded, "Today, I am controlled by the *bla ma*. When you throw me into the hole, please take away a bit of the wax seal."

As I threw the box into the hole, I removed a bit of the wax seal. My friend then slipped away and returned to the sick man.

"It seems it didn't help. Now we should do a fire ritual," the *bla ma* said.

So we made a burnt offering. As it burned, we poured some melted butter on the fire. I took a ritual dipper of melted butter. My friend became very small, sat in the melted butter, and begged, "Please pour out a little of the melted butter or I will be burned."

I did so, and he slipped away again.

After we had made a burnt offering the *bla ma* lamented, "Today, these rituals are not effective." He seemed deep in thought and then suddenly declared, "We must do another ritual," and went outside to rest.

I saw that my friend was very happy. He said, "Now I won't have to care about anything because the next ritual will create a hundred foods and that is enough for my whole life."

The holy *bla ma* returned and chanted while performing the next ritual. We put a small amount of food on pieces of sheep wool. When some food dropped out of the wool my friend reprimanded, "Don't let any food drop out!"

When the *bla ma* finished chanting, he took the collected foods and threw them into a river near the home. He then said to that family, "If you want to give me something, please give it to this monk."



I met him on the way and asked him to assist me. He came here to help."

The family offered me many things, but I only took the food that they offered.

Some months later when I returned home, I learned that my pack yaks and the items that I had bought in Lhasa had all been safely delivered. I had lost nothing. I was rich and had many valuable things.

Some years later, I became poorer and poorer. It was difficult for me to live. One day, I rode my only horse with saddlebags to Mthe bo'i lung ba where my old monk friend had told me to go if I had difficulties. When I reached Bo'i lung, I asked the local people, "Where is Mthe bo'i lung ba?"

Nobody would tell me and some I asked ran from me.

Finally, an old man said, "Who are you? How dare you come here! Why do you come here? Nobody is at that place. When people even hear that name, they are terrified."

"What happened?" I asked.

"A demon attacked Mthe bo'i lung pa. There are no livestock there," he replied and told me the exact location.

I followed the old man's directions and, when it was almost evening, I came to a very huge rocky mountain. The front of the mountain was red, which seemed special. I thought this mountain was what I was looking for. I rode my horse there and called my friend's name many times. I shouted, "You told me to find you when I was having a difficult life. Now I have a very difficult life so I have come here."

A voice said, "What's the problem? Who is calling me?"

"I was your companion when we went to Lha sa. I have problems now," I confided.

He said, "You wait here tonight and I'll try to help, but I was exorcized by Bla ma Shar skyabs mgon ki rti so it's very difficult to help."

I slept near the mountain. At about midnight he threw many things near me, and said, "Here are many big coins. Take them. If you



can't take them all, dig a hole, bury them, and return when you need more. I can't help you again."

I filled my saddlebags with coins and returned home.

Before the monk became a demon, he had meditated for many years in a cave and was a very good monk. He chanted mantras and saved many people threatened by disease, but one day he had an ulcer on his foot and chanted for himself. Unfortunately, the chanting was ineffective and the ulcer became larger. "I have been practicing for a long time but my ulcer only worsens," he observed so, in anger, he gave up his religious practice and prayed to become a demon after he died, which is exactly what happened. He caused great harm to monasteries, monks, and *bla ma*. He even set fire to Bla brang Monastery twice, and trying to burn monasteries in the Lha sa area, before he was eventually exorcized by a *bla ma*.

He told me:

One time I became a louse and tried to kill a *bla ma* by biting his neck, but the *bla ma* caught me, put me on a piece of wool, rubbed it many times, and then threw me into a river. I flowed down the river for a long time but finally managed to get out. As I was heading back to Bla brang, I met two *bla ma* and some monks riding horses. I sat on one monk's back, intending to hurt him because I was very hungry. I wanted to eat him. Unfortunately, the *bla ma* realized that I was there, shouted, and beat the monk's horse. The horses began running very fast and as a result, I couldn't escape.

When we reached Bsang khog,<sup>1</sup> the *bla ma* said to the monks, "We're hungry. Cook a pot with a few noodles in a lot of soup."

After the monks cooked, the *bla ma* angrily scolded, "Why did you cook such food without noodles?" and kicked the pot, spilling the noodles onto the ground.

Actually, they had pretended to be angry, otherwise, there was no way to spill the pot of noodles.

Then the *bla ma* told the monks, "Cook the noodles this time without any soup."

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<sup>1</sup> Bsang khog is located near Bla brang Monastery.



The monks did as the *bla ma* directed. The monks had been surprised by the *bla ma*'s anger and spilling the noodles. The *bla ma* were usually kind and even-tempered. The monks didn't know that I was there with them, nor did they know that I was very hungry and eager to hurt them. But the *bla ma* knew and thus wanted me to eat the noodles.

After the noodles were cooked, the *bla ma* again scolded, "How can we eat such bad food?" and kicked the pot of noodles over again.

They didn't eat anything but I ate a lot.

After reaching Bla brang, the *bla ma* said to the monks, "Tonight, we will cook by ourselves," and then they made dumplings. After they finished, they put me in one dumpling and got ready to cook it, but the pot was full. They then took out the dumpling I was in and put it on top of the roof, where I spent the night. The next morning, a bird took the dumpling to a mountain in front of Bla brang Monastery. In trying to eat it, the bird pecked a small hole in the dumpling from which I escaped. After that, I didn't do any bad things because I had been exorcized by Bla ma Skyabs mgon ki rti, a very high *bla ma* and the leader of Ki rti Monastery.

One day, Bla ma Sku phyogs ki rti was in Bla brang. When he returned to Hor gtsang ki rti Monastery, he met the demon, seized him, subdued him, and forced him to live in Hor gtsang ki rti Monastery as a protector deity, safeguarding the monastery where the *bla ma* lived.


To avoid the demon, certain monks from other monasteries dared not visit Hor gtsang ki rti Monastery.

One of those *bla ma* was Wa mong of Bla brang Monastery. The other was Bla ma Bsod grags. They were the *bla ma* who gave food to the demon.



## THREE BROTHERS AND THE SICKNESS-CAUSING DEMON

'Jam dbyangs bkra shis འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

ong ago, Sman pa tshon po was very rich. He had three sons. When he became old and was about to die from a disease, he summoned his sons and said to the oldest, "I will die soon. What will you do after I die?"

"After you die, I will try my best to become richer," the son replied.

Sman pa tshon po was then relieved of worry about this son's future.

He then asked his second son, "My dear son what will you do after my death?"

"I will go on a pilgrimage and pray for your next incarnation at all the monasteries. I will not ignore even a single temple," his second son promised.

Sman pa tshon po then asked his youngest son, "What will you do after my death?"

"No matter how much time it takes, even if it takes my whole life, I will find your *nad bdag* 'sickness-causing demon'," he said.

The father silently patted his youngest son's shoulder and smiled.

Meanwhile, his two older brothers laughed loudly. The oldest said, "If our father dies, we should do important things such as praying, chanting scriptures, and inviting monks to come conduct rituals for the next life and incarnation. It's impossible to kill a *nad bdag*."

The youngest son insisted, "I must kill the *nad bdag*."

Later, after their father died, the first son tried his best to do as he promised and they became richer.

The second son went on a pilgrimage performing many rituals for their father's next life.

The third son searched everywhere for his father's *nad bdag*, but found nothing. Then one day he met a man with whom he became friends. One night they were so hungry that the new friend



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stole a sheep, which they slaughtered, cooked, and, while enjoying the mutton, chatted about this and that.

The new friend said, "This mutton is very fat and really delicious. I've eaten human flesh and many other kinds of flesh, but this is the most delicious. However, some time ago I ate a man named Sman pa tshon po. His flesh was as delicious as today's."


The third son then knew the man was a ghost - the *nad bdag* who had killed his father. He pretended nothing was amiss, but actually, he was shaking in fear. After they went to bed, he pretended to sleep. After the ghost slept, he took an ax and killed the ghost.

Finally, after each had done what he had promised their father, the sons had a happy life.



## YOU ARE MY MOTHER'S MOTHER

Gu ru 'phrin las ཀུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས།

 breeze blew gently one summer morning under a dull sun. Grandmother Lha mo seemed displeased with the weather. Her face had as many wrinkles and crevices as a piece of tightly clinched paper that had been unwadded and laid out flat. She began her story, as usual, sitting near her family tent flap. Picking up her chipped, dragon-decorated tea bowl with the fingers of her dirt-encrusted right hand, she scraped away a few bits of dried, dark *rtsam pa* stuck to the bowl while starting the story.

Occasionally pausing to sip some milk tea, Lha mo normally exuded enthusiasm when telling stories to her grandson, Bkra shis rnam dkar. He enjoyed her stories as much as she enjoyed telling them, but today was different - Grandmother had tears in her eyes as she talked.

Bkra shis rnam dkar was so engrossed in the story that he didn't even blink until Grandmother stopped, two lines of tears wetting her cheeks. She piously tapped her prayer wheel against her forehead before putting it, wrapped in a red cloth, on her lap.

Bkra shis rnam dkar was etching a yak on the lap of Grandmother's sheepskin robe. Its oily surface was perfect for drawing. A mischievous, stubborn, six-year-old, he sometimes sucked and licked mucus from his nose when he was angry with his mother.

Grandmother adjusted the upper part of the sheepskin robe on her left shoulder and again touched the prayer wheel to her forehead piously as she slowly closed her eyes. She then placed the prayer wheel in her robe pouch and paused. Great sadness was written on her face, testifying to the fact that she had endured more than seventy years of life. Bkra shis rnam dkar scratched at a louse in his short, messy hair. He stared at Grandmother's face with curiosity, eager to know what would happen next and impatiently demanded, "Grandmother, who was the '*dre mo* 'witch'? Why did people call her a witch?"



"You will be frightened if I tell you the truth," Grandmother replied gently.

...

The Dga' lung Tribe was camped near the Yellow River. It was a wonderful place in summer and the locals found great pleasure in the beautiful scenery. Herders enjoyed singing and listening to melodious herding songs, while also delighting in the lovely sound of lambs bleating as they leaped over small glistening creeks, frolicking here and there, excited by brief sprinkles of rain. On the emerald grassland decorated with fragrant flowers, young herders chased the end of a rainbow to one side of the Yellow River. The other bank was a densely forested hill.

Every drizzly evening, locals also enjoyed the many birds that sang while perched on the green, vigorously leafing branches.

...

Winter was, however, another story of another world. No one said Dga' lung was a perfect winter home. Feelings of desolation and loneliness were intensified by whirlwinds that periodically swept dust from yak enclosures, coloring the horizon red.

On a day that was both auspicious and destined for tragedy, Lha mo rose earlier than her mother, Dpal 'dzoms, and milked all the yaks. Her mother loved her and never scolded her. Lha mo held a wooden milk bucket with her right hand and walked to her family's tent as briskly as the heavy bucket allowed. She was happy.

After kindling a fire in the adobe stove, she wiped her sweaty, unwashed forehead with her robe sleeve. Next, she poured hot water from an old kettle covered with black soot into a cracked red basin and added a dash of cold water.

Her mother started to get up as Lha mo was tidying her hair.

"Today must be auspicious since you got up so early!" she greeted.

"Dear Mother, you forgot! Today, my herdmate, Bkra skyid, will marry!" Lha mo said.

Dpal 'dzoms yawned, paused, and then offered, "Yes! You should join her wedding."



"I promised I would join her wedding party when we herded calves together. Look! The tea is boiling. Let's have breakfast now," Lha mo suggested.

Dpal 'dzoms yawned in response.

"Dear Mother, please get up. I must leave soon after breakfast. Bkra skyid will be so happy if I'm the first guest who arrives at her wedding," Lha mo gently persuaded.

"OK. I'll get up right now," Dpal 'dzoms agreed but stayed in bed a while longer before kicking away the robes that served as her bed covers, one by one.

Dpal 'dzoms took a black wooden box from a pile of supplies and gear after the meal. The box was actually white, but it was wrapped in a dry yak-skin covered with black hair. Dpal 'dzoms unwrapped a rough yak hair rope from around the unlocked box. The rope ensured the box lid stayed in place and prevented mice from getting inside. Lha mo stood next to her mother, eager for something inside. She snatched a black robe from the box before her mother had completely removed the lid, raced outside, jerked off the robe she had on, and pulled on the black robe. Of her three robes, it was her favorite and her only unpatched piece of clothing. It was what she wore when she attended parties.

Clad in the robe, she stood near her family tent's flap, put her right hand to her forehead, and inspected the sky with sparkling, inquisitive eyes. Eager to learn what the weather would be, sunshine lit up her cheeks, making them resemble coral.

Lha mo never asked her mother to buy ornaments for her. The black robe satisfied her.

As Dpal 'dzoms drove her family's twenty yaks to the mountains, Lha mo mounted a gentle riding yak and set off, soon catching sight of her peers waiting for her. She sped up when they shouted at her. Her friends were very kind to her because of her beauty and compassion and never humiliated or denigrated her because of her poverty.

Lha 'dzoms, clad in a spotless white, sheepskin robe, urged, "Lha mo! Make your yak go faster or we'll be too late and won't be able to enjoy the wedding."



Gangs lha, clad in a robe trimmed with otter pelts, laughed loudly and said, "Hey everybody! Lha 'dzoms is in such a hurry. Maybe someone is waiting for her? Let's see who her handsome boyfriend is. How wonderful!"

"It's more interesting if we can see your boyfriend!" Bkra g.yang said, adjusting her fox-fur hat.

"She'll surely become a nun. She has no boyfriend and will join a nunnery by the end of next year. Just look at her short hair! It's already cut in a nun's style," Lha 'dzoms pronounced, rearranging her shiny long hair from her back so it flowed between her pleasingly generous breasts.

"Hey, dear friends! Do you prefer Lha 'dzoms's bald boyfriend or a round piece of *rtsam pa*? Her boyfriend was a monk for a year so only Lha 'dzoms is willing to be his girlfriend," Bkra g.yang proclaimed authoritatively and then laughed so loudly that she almost toppled off her horse.

Lha mo said little, but she enjoyed her friends' banter.

...

Dbang phyug was singing from the center of a huge, black yak-hair tent. A white *kha btags* hung from his right hand while in his left he held a dragon-decorated bowl brimming with yak milk. Everyone enjoyed gazing at his attractive physique and listening to his pleasant voice. He was considered to be the most handsome young man in his community.

As Lha mo and her friends entered the tent, Lha mo nervously blushed, her cheeks turning as red as shiny autumn apples. It was the first time for many of the people there to see her. Everyone focused on Lha mo's arrival, ignoring Dbang phyug. Dressed in her black robe, Lha mo was a new center of attention. Lha mo self-consciously put her head down and sat by Gangs lha near the tent entrance. Her nervousness meant she had forgotten to look for her boyfriend.

Dbang phyug plopped next to his close friend, Bkra shis, picked up a dragon-decorated bowl, and sipped a bit of milk tea. He then set his bowl down and with his right hand stroked his long hair back. His silver finger-ring, inset with three red corals, trapped a few



strands of hair. Lha mo watched as he pulled the hair from his ring. Noticing Lha mo was watching, he roughly jerked at the hair.

In his thick red sash, Bkra shis wore a long sword in a silver sheath decorated with coral. Dbang phyug's hand struck the hilt of Bkra shis's sword. Surprised by a jolt of pain, he scolded Bkra shis.

At sunset, as most guests started back to their homes, Bkra shis and his friends huddled near the bank of the Yellow River, talking about girls and night dating. Bkra shis ran to Dbang phyug and whispered in his ear. A second later, Dbang phyug angrily burst out, "Ask Gangs skyabs to meet me right now. Go quickly!"

Bkra shis nodded in agreement and respectfully exclaimed, "Yes!"

...

Dbang phyug and Gangs skyabs were standing among rocks by the river. Rage burned in Dbang phyug's heart as he accused, "How dare you date Lha mo. You're ugly! You think you can attract her by pretending to be a good person? Stupid! Don't you know beautiful girls like handsome guys like me?"

Gangs skyabs ignored this outburst. Enraged, Dbang phyug slapped Gang skyabs's right cheek and threatened, "Do you understand what I'm saying? Lha mo is my lover and will be my wife. Don't dare meet her again or you'll lose your life. Do you understand?"

Gangs skyabs was furious, but he endured the slap and remained quiet.

"You son-of-a-bitch! Are you deaf?" Dbang phyug bellowed and slapped him again.

This time Gangs skyabs suddenly bent down, picked up a rock, and smashed Dbang phyug's head. He crumpled among the rocks, blood spurting from his head, and lay like a corpse as a tiny rivulet of blood flowed into the Yellow River, creating a red current that soon vanished into the larger stream.

...

Bkra kho sat cross-legged, wearing an angry expression. He and his brother, the community leader, Bsod tshe, were having a private conversation near Bsod tshe's family tent. Taking a deep breath Bkra



kho began," My son, Dbang phyug, almost died last night from a head injury..."

Bsod tshe interrupted, "Don't worry Brother. I'll deal with it. We'll get a big settlement from Gangs skyabs."

Bkra kho blurted, "Gangs skyabs's family is rich. They don't care about the property. I just want Gangs skyabs, Tshe grags's son, dead."

Bsod tshe looked at his brother's angry face and was silent for a bit before cautioning, "Bloody fighting will follow if you take revenge. You know I'm the community leader. I'll take responsibility for this event. I'll handle it peacefully."

Bkra kho seemed to nod in agreement and added, "It's good if Tshe grags feels what it's like for his son to suffer serious injury."

Bsod tshe continued persuading Bkra kho, who finally agreed to wait for Bsod tshe's report a few days later.

...

Tshe grags warmly greeted Bsod tshe in his family tent and seated him on a thick, smooth wool mat. A platter piled with steaming mutton was set in front of him. Bsod tshe and Tshe grags both took a piece of mutton and sipped milk tea. Then Bsod tshe began in a friendly way, "My dear sworn brother, don't worry about Bkra kho's son, Dbang phyug. It was a small injury. It's not serious."

Tshe grags knew that his friend's purpose was to reassure him, and reluctantly said, "OK, Brother."

"It's best for your son, Gangs skyabs, to apologize to Dbang phyug. Otherwise, we won't extinguish the fire of Bkra kho's anger."

"Is it appropriate for me to give some money as compensation?" Tshe grags asked.

"That's unnecessary. I told you, my sworn brother, that I saw Dbang phyug's wound, and it's just a scratch."

Tshe grags agreed and then they chatted about this and that.

...

Bkra kho's oldest son, Byang chub, was chanting scriptures near his brother, Dbang phyug, who was sprawled on a bed with a bandaged head. Bkra kho entered the family tent and leaned his rifle against a bag of grain in the lower part of the tent. He took a couple of swallows



of tea from a bowl and said nothing. Some minutes later, Byang chub finished chanting and wrapped the scripture in a yellow cloth. Byang chub understood that Gangs skyabs never bullied others and convinced his father not to take revenge.

Bkra kho knelt by his son and asked, "Dear son, how are you today?"

Dbang phyug stared vacantly, giving no response. Bkra kho thought he had spoken too quietly and loudly said, "My son, how are you today?"

Receiving no reply. Bkra kho took a deep breath and stood up. He realized his son's mind had vanished.

...

The next day, Bsod tshe again visited Tshe grags's tent, regret and shame etched on his face. He tried to say something to Tshe grags, but nothing comprehensible emerged from his mouth.

Tshe grags poured boiling milk tea into a bowl. Bsod tshe sipped it and eventually said, "I'm sorry. You should give ten yaks to Dbang phyug. He's now just like a corpse."

Tshe grags was stupefied, not because Dbang phyug was in a coma, but at the thought of losing ten yaks. He scratched his messy hair and said incredulously, "Ten yaks? Because of that fight over Lha mo?!"

...

Ten days later, Gangs skyabs heard that Lha mo's family had been exiled from the community. He refused to speak. His mother, Gangs mdzes, urged him to eat, but he refused.

Tshe grags glared at Gangs skyabs and scolded, "Shameless! Only a fool would be attracted to a poor girl. You know our family is wealthy and we would be shamed if you fell in love with a girl from a poor family."

"Father, why should Lha mo's family give ten yaks to Dbang phyug's family? I struck Dbang phyug's head, not Lha mo. Our family should take responsibility for the yaks that Bkra kho requested. It's not fair for Lha mo's family to pay ten yaks," Gangs skyabs said.

"Shut your dirty mouth!" Tshe grags bellowed.



"Father, have mercy on Lha mo's family. They only have twenty yaks!" Gangs skyabs pleaded.

"Her mother grabbed our community leader, Bsod tshe, by the hair as they argued over the ten yaks. Stupid! Witch! Who'll have mercy on a witch like Dpal 'dzoms? Do you understand what I'm saying? Just shut up!" Tshe grags declared.

...

Lha mo reluctantly helped her mother pack her family's few belongings. She understood that the conniving community leader and the cruel Bkra kho were bullying her family. She sadly urged her mother to not move and not pay any yaks.

Dpal 'dzoms comforted, "Dear baby! Don't cry. We'll start a happy, peaceful life in your Aunt G.yang mo's community."

Distraught at leaving her friends and lover, Lha mo knelt near a bag of grain and sobbed.

...

After three years, Lha mo finally seemed to be enjoying her life in the Ri lung Tribe with her mother. Nevertheless, she still often recalled with sadness her happy moments with Gangs skyabs earlier in the Dga' lung Tribe. Her pillow was often wet with tears that her mother never noticed.

But noticing that Lha mo's cheeks were swollen her mother urged her to eat more and curiously wondered why Lha mo hadn't fallen in love with any of the many men who chased her. Even A mchod a lo's son, Thar 'bum, had pursued her.

...

Having finished his daily chanting A mchod a lo put his wooden bowl into his dirty, bedraggled monk robe's pouch. After a moment's contemplation, he put a jacket on over his robe. His wife knew he would visit the home of Tshe brtan, the richest family in their community.

Tshe brtan warmly welcomed A mchod a lo, who had chanted scriptures for them after his wife had given birth to their three daughters. Tshe brtan's fourth child was a boy, consequently, Tshe brtan treated A mchod a lo like a holy *bla ma* and was not bothered that A mchod a lo had a wife and children. In fact, all the local



community members respected and followed A mchod a lo's suggestions.

...

One sunny morning as Lha mo drove a calf to her tent she passed A mchod a lo, who was peeing near his tent. When he noticed Lha mo, he pretended he was doing nothing out of the ordinary and greeted, "Hey Lha mo, how's your mother?" in a friendly way.

"My mother is good..." Lha mo murmured.

"Visit my home when you are free," A mchod a lo said.

Lha mo blushed feeling guilty that she had refused to listen to both her mother and A mchod a lo and had rejected A mchod a lo's son's offer of marriage.

...

Dpal 'dzoms and Lha mo tied all their yaks. Realizing that her family's sick calf was not among the yaks, Lha mo mounted her riding yak and headed into a narrow, forested valley. Her riding yak's moist, pink tongue hung out, almost touching the zigzagging path. It was a dim evening and dark clouds swirled above her. Unable to see very far into the distance, she mooed like a mother yak. She went near a huge, dark cave and saw the calf she was searching for dozing at the cave entrance. The calf woke up in terror at the sound of Lha mo dismounting nearby and scampered into the cave. Lha mo followed and was astonished by the sight of a fire burning. For a moment, she trembled in fear, unable to move her feet. She then managed to back away but stepped on someone's foot.

It was Gangs skyabs! Lha mo could not accept he was a human being until he touched her right cheek. Gangs skyabs's skin was rough and dark, but his handsome, attractive appearance remained.

"Lha mo! We must thank the Buddha for bringing us together again. I will never leave you until I die. Lha mo! Maybe you think I'm mad. I left my family three years ago and became a hunter. I argued with my father after he arranged a marriage for me. I swore I would never marry anyone but you. I got here a couple of days ago, but I never imagined we would meet so soon "



Lha mo silently lowered her head and dabbed her tears. Gangs skyabs took her in his arms and wiped away her tears with his right hand.

Some days later, herders drove their yaks back home. Dismounting from his yak near his family's tent Thar 'bum was in a hurry. With a pale face, he entered his family tent where his father was chanting and blurted, "I saw a ghost. A living ghost," Thar 'bum.

"Where did you see a ghost?" A mchod a lo asked.

"I saw a ghost enter a cave in Srib nag Valley," Thar 'bum answered. "It was tall and wearing a large animal skin. Its hair was as long as a woman's. Maybe the ghost is a female. I didn't see its face," continued Thar 'bum.

Doubting this report, A mchod a lo resumed chanting scriptures.

The community members were frightened by Thar 'bum's report and the next day the ghost was their only topic.

G.yang mo was sixty and lived alone. She tethered her ten yaks and went to Dpal 'dzoms's home to ask Lha mo to help find her three missing yaks. Dpal 'dzoms was afraid the ghost would harm her daughter, but Lha mo persuaded her mother to let her go. She sincerely wanted to help Aunt G.yang mo, knowing no one else would.

...

It was a dark night. They searched everywhere until they grew tired. G.yang mo then suggested they return home. Suddenly, she tumbled to the ground after her yak bolted when a rabbit sprang in front of them. Lha mo quickly dismounted, tied her riding yak to a bush, and then chased after and caught G.yang mo's yak.

"Are you OK, Aunt G.yang mo?" Lha mo cried.

"I'm fine. Don't worry. Where's my yak?" G.yang mo whispered hoarsely.

Lha mo lightly pounded G.yang mo's back until she breathed normally. She then helped G.yang mo remount her gentle yak and together they headed back home.



The next morning, Lha mo got up earlier than usual and ran to G.yang mo's home, where her aunt was lying in bed with a pale, gaunt face. Lha mo was worried. Not knowing what to do, she asked A mchod a lo to chant for G.yang mo. A mchod a lo chanted for the whole day and performed various rituals. Nevertheless, G.yang mo became increasingly ill and passed away that night.

...

A mchod a lo pondered possible explanations for G.yang mo's death. Suddenly, a smile lit up his dark oily face as he recalled the ghost story.

Locals accepted that G.yang mo's death was because she had been possessed by evil. They also believed A mchod a lo's story of the ghost that was so violent and powerful that he could not defeat it. From that day on, locals began to have negative opinions of Lha mo.

Over time Lha mo's robes became worn and tattered. Wearing her favorite black robe, she drove her family's few yaks to Srib nag Valley, passing the community. Lha mo was no longer the famous lovely girl that attracted everyone's attention. On the contrary, some local girls avoided her as vicious rumors circulated. Some didn't even use her real name. A new name, Ma ne, became Lha mo's nickname. Rumor said Lha mo was possessed by evil and at times was not in her tent when some young men visited her at night.

Locals thought they would be possessed by a ghost if they used her real name whereas using "Ma ne" which they believed symbolized the Six Sacred Syllables, would keep them safe from evil.

Gangs skyabs sat near a creek, plucked a red flower, and hesitantly offered it to Lha mo. She raised her head a little and took it.

Gangs skyabs blushed. He had something to say but nervously remained silent. Lha mo lowered her head again as she twisted and tore the red flower into bits.

Eventually, Gangs skyabs haltingly said, "Lha mo, let's marry and live in our own way."

Lha mo gazed at her swollen belly as tears drenched her strawberry-colored cheeks. She murmured something that Gangs skyabs did not understand.



"Why are you crying? There's no reason for despair. Do you no longer love me? Do you have another boyfriend?" Gangs skyabs inquired sadly.

"You are my only lover. I'm eager to marry you, but we can't change our destiny. I don't want both our lives to be miserable. You can have a happy life if you leave this hellish place. I want my lover to live in a place as peaceful as paradise," Lha mo managed in a trembling voice.

"Lha mo, I prefer to live a tragic life with you rather than live in Heaven without you! Lha mo, please! Marry me. We can create a happy life. Lha mo, I love you!"

"My life is finished if you reject my sincere request," Gangs skyabs declared, facing the sky.

"I am no longer Lha mo. No one in my community calls me that," she said, leaning against Gangs skyabs. "Locals believe I am an evil witch," she added in a whisper.

"Oh, my Buddha! You are not a witch. You are Lha mo, my lover! You will be a kind-hearted mother soon enough," Gangs skyabs said, gazing at Lha mo's belly.

...

Lha mo's only child, Tshe tshe, who was Bkra shis rnam dkar's mother, was eavesdropping, wanting to learn more about her father. Unfortunately, Bkra shis rnam dkar suddenly interrupted Grandmother's story by standing up. "Gangs skyabs was right. You are Lha mo! You are not a witch. You are my mother's mother, Lha mo!" he proclaimed with great assurance. "You are not a witch! You are my mother's mother, right?" Bkra shis rnam dkar demanded.

Grandmother was astonished and did not answer, but a big smile on her oily face signaled that the rest of her life would be a bright departure from the past decades.

It rained in the morning. A steady drizzle refreshed all creation and energized the damp grassland that grew more vigorously becoming even more vibrantly green. A gentle aromatic breeze made the countless flowers sway, sending showers of pearly droplets of water earthward under the flowers.



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Bkra shis rnam dkar and Bkra shis g.yang 'dzoms were naked and ran happily toward a small brook decorated with nameless flowers.

Grandmother put her left hand to her forehead as her right hand gripped her red prayer wheel. She smiled when she saw her grandson with his lovely playmate, Bkra shis g.yang 'dzoms.



## PAIN

Gu ru 'phrin las ཀུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལག་།

n the morning, herders sang on horseback while driving their livestock to the mountains, enjoying the view of a glorious mountain ridge thrusting into the blue sky. The holy mountain's peak was decorated with thick white clouds. Many creeks flowed lyrically in every direction at the foot of the sacred mountain. Various birds chirped on vigorously growing tree branches, as butterflies lazily circled among fragrant, colorful summer blossoms. The small, G.yang ru Tribe was camped at the bottom of the holy, dignified mountain. Men from other tribes commonly offered incense to this mountain deity.

Every morning, G.yang ru Tribe women and girls got up early and milked yaks while singing milking tunes. This attracted many strong handsome men who had come to offer incense to the mountain deity.

Locals believed that no tribe would invade and steal yaks from the G.yang ru Tribe because the mountain deity regarded the tribe as a family member and protected it. The G.yang ru Tribe was the most peaceful and happiest tribe of all the tribes in Sngon lung County.

When it came time to move from the summer pasture to the winter pasture, Mtsho mo hurriedly packed her family belongings into sacks and yak-skin bags. With the cuff of her right sleeve, she wiped the dirt and sweat from her weathered face.

Her yak hair tent was the smallest among the tribe's households, but it seemed a perfect fit for her family. Though it was faded and full of patches, she preferred it, because three generations of her family had also dwelt there. She never desired a new or bigger one. This tent was very precious to her and provided ample space for her few, packed bags.

After packing up everything except her wooden bucket, which she would hang on a yak pack frame, she rushed outside and called to her brother's son, Don 'grub, who was busy untying his family's livestock, preparing to move to the winter pasture.



He ignored her. Anger flared in her heart. "Bastard! Is he deaf? People are only polite to the rich and powerful," she scolded.

Three of her brother's family members were nearby and they all ignored her. This made Mtsho mo extremely upset. She was curious why her nephew ignored her, especially since he was the only person who really cared about Mtsho mo and her family.

Actually, Don 'grub was not only kind to her and her family, but he was also the most compassionate and sociable person in the tribe. His dream was to become a monk and live a peaceful, tranquil life.

After she had shouted more than ten times, hoping to hear good news from Don 'grub, she instead heard that her oldest son, Rdo rje, would not return home as soon as she wished.

She despondently entered her tent and sat on a pack near the tent entrance. She looked outside despairingly and noticed a calf that was still tied. She put her palms together, held them near her forehead, and piously prayed, "Oh my Buddha! Every living being is so appropriately piteous. How could I leave this calf tied till noon? How cruel and forgetful I have been."

She picked up her wooden pail and walked to the calf's mother. She did not need to hobble this yak's front legs as was necessary for the other mother yaks. She untied the famished calf, which eagerly ran to its mother and nursed while rhythmically butting the udder.

Meanwhile, Mtsho mo's mind was full of thoughts about her oldest son's addiction to gambling. He had taken ten of her yaks the previous year to partially pay off his debts.

When the calf's mouth was full of milk bubbles, she gently took her muddy, milk-covered right hand and tugged the rope around the calf's neck with her left hand. It was not easy to pull a calf from its mother. The calf jerked back, upsetting her. Her gentleness evaporated. She roughly twisted the calf's tail, pulled the hair on its back, and tied it to a tether that the other calves were tied to separating them from the mother yaks.

Taking a deep breath, she lamented, "Poor little calf! I'm your only helper when you are attacked by ruthless wolves and waiting for



death, but how stoutly you resist me!" and then kicked the calf's belly with all her strength.

She walked around the calf, panting hard. Standing near the mother yak, she put her hands on its back and pondered. She recalled how her third husband had beaten her oldest son badly after he had defied him.

As she recalled her past life and especially her marriages, she automatically wiped away tears, refusing to wallow in painful reminiscences.

All the tribal households had moved to the winter pasture, except for Mtsho mo's family and Skyid 'dzoms, a single, childless woman in her fifties. Mtsho mo drove her twenty yaks to a small hill near her home and then went to visit Skyid 'dzoms.

Meanwhile, Mtsho mo's riding yak stood motionless near her tent, like a watchdog protecting the family. Mtsho mo only rode this gentle yak when she drove the yaks back to the yak enclosure from the mountains and hills. She had developed pain in her knees two years earlier, which made having a mount important.

One day Mtsho mo had ridden the yak to consult a local traditional doctor, who suggested that she needed to lose weight and see a physician who practiced modern medicine. She did not tell her oldest son, Rdor rje, what the doctor had said, thinking that the medical treatment fee would be expensive and no one would be willing to accompany her to a hospital in a city.

She was now focused on finding money to pay senior middle school fees for her youngest son, Tshe ring. She hoped he would have a happy, satisfying life in school just like the children of rich families. Each time she got some money from selling a yak or wild herbs she had collected, she sent most of it to Tshe ring without her oldest son's knowledge.

Skyid 'dzoms warmly welcomed her into her small tent, full of the odor of *rtsam pa*. They had a simple breakfast. "Do you want more *rtsam pa*?" offered Skyid 'dzoms.

"No thanks, but I'll have another steamed bun with a bowl of milk tea," hungry Mtsho mo replied.



"Have as much as you like, but there are few steamed buns. Probably you won't be full. Meat soup with steamed bread is wonderful. My grandmother often cooked meat soup and steamed bread for me. It's extremely delicious and my favorite meal. Unfortunately, I haven't had meat for a long time. It's almost been a year since you gave me a calf's front leg. You know how it is, no husband, no meat. No one likes to sin by killing yaks for someone else," Skyid 'dzoms said in a friendly, intimate way.

Mtsho mo totally understood her friend. "I'll be full, so don't worry. I also really like both *rtsam pa* and bread with meat soup. My grandmother also cooked meat soup for me," she said quietly and bowed her head as tears moistened her cheeks.

Skyid 'dzoms felt sorry for her and comforted, "Don't cry. Everyone makes mistakes. The only perfect people in the world are some holy *bla ma*."

Mtsho mo was quiet for a long time and then sobbed, "I did not make a mistake just once, but three times. I chose my husbands and left my mother three times. I did not imagine that they would leave me when I left Mother for them."

Skyid 'dzoms knew Mtsho mo would talk about her cruel husbands and how they had tortured her and her sons. She often talked about this when they met. She said, "You are so lucky to have two sons, unlike me. It's really difficult to live as a single woman. I really yearn to live with a man."

Mtsho mo moved near Skyid 'dzoms and said, "Don't easily trust a man. No man really understands our feelings and our miserable situation. They just want to use our bodies. I'm sorry for my two fatherless sons."

Skyid 'dzoms nodded in agreement and said, "Yes! You are so right, but we really need a husband to prevent cruel youngsters from bullying us. Last night, I had a night visitor. He told me about your lover, a man your age who visits you at night. You're young enough. Why don't you marry again? I'd like to marry, but no man will marry me because they think I'm too poor and too old, although they will come to visit me at night."



A smile played on Mtsho mo's face as she sipped milk tea, "But, how can I avoid rumors?"

Adding some dry yak dung to the stove Skyid 'dzoms continued, "It doesn't matter what others think. What matters is having a man who'll take our burdens and put them on his shoulders."

This conversation made Mtsho mo recall her fourth marriage, but then she noticed her riding yak was still tied near her tent. She rushed over and untied it, feeling sorry that the yak had been unable to eat or drink the whole day. She felt guilty to have ridden it to drive the other yaks back home. In addition, she felt bad about having beaten the yak the day before after she had fallen off it as it quickly descended the mountain.

One of Mtsho mo's herding mates had told her a story he had heard from a *bla ma* about a horse's soul:

A horse had been treated badly by his master when it was alive. The *bla ma* met the horse's master and urged him to repent, but he refused. He then died from a painful illness a few days later.

In fact, she had saved the yak's life when her oldest son had wanted to sell it. So she now vowed to never be unkind to her yak again and chanted some mantras.

The following morning, Rdo rje got up early, packed, and saddled two yaks. His mother was still angry that he had returned home a day late. She worried that the tribe leader would punish her family and scold her for not moving on time to the winter pasture, which violated tribal rules. Ignoring his mother's scolding, Rdo rje got ready to drive the livestock.

Rdo rje grabbed the watchdog's chain to prevent the dog from attacking a passerby. The dog pulled back and angrily glared at him. Rdo rje knew his mother was kind to the mastiff. He had suggested many times that they not feed the dog but instead, let him find food for himself. His mother disagreed and gave it *rtsam pa* soup and leftovers twice a day. Every time Rdo rje came home, his mother would tell him to go to the township town to mill barley. He knew



why his family's *rtsam pa* finished so quickly, but he never complained.

Mtsho mo wanted Rdo rje to marry and then care for the family. Despite feeling embarrassed Mtsho mo had raised the matter of marriage with Rdo rje many times. She hated it when Rdo rje wandered aimlessly here and there and sold her yaks to pay off his debts. She also made sure that her brother, Bkra shis, would not give Rdo rje money to pay his debts.

A wooden cabin sat in a deep, narrow valley. Normally no one lived in the valley, except for Mtsho mo's family. Both sides of the valley were so high that it was impossible to enjoy sunrise views. One valley mountain was covered with thick, dense trees. Anyone hearing the harsh wail of the wind blowing through the trees would feel cold and lonely.

They had put all their belongings in the wooden cabin that had only one room with two windows. Painted with red earth and yak dung, the cabin reeked of the fetid air of mice feces and decay.

Mtsho mo and Rdo rje set off with their yaks for the winter pasture, reaching the cabin in the early evening.

Mtsho mo made a fire in the adobe stove in the cabin. There was no water to heat so Rdo rje took a bucket and walked to the door. Mtsho mo said, "You are twenty and old enough to marry."

Rdo rje paused for a moment, pretended not to hear, and walked to a nearby spring to fetch water. As he scooped water into his bucket, he thought about a story one of his friends had told him about a virgin boy, Tshe don, who had visited a girl:

Romantically inexperienced, he had not given even so much as a little kiss to the girl and had soon left.

Later, the girl told others about Tshe don. Many cruel rumors then circulated in the local community. The boy's friends and peers joked and laughed at him. One day not long after these vicious rumors began circulating, he drove his family's yaks to a high mountain and returned home for breakfast. After dismounting, he met his mother in his family's house yard, carrying a metal basin full of ash, which, to make things worse, she flung in front of him.



The whole day he felt uncomfortable that his mother had thrown ash in front of him. He recalled one of his grandmother's sayings: *Nangs snga mo'i thal ba gyong dgong phyi dro'i thal ba grog* 'Good luck comes when you encounter ash being discarded in the evening, bad luck comes when this happens in the morning'.

Unable to bear this, Tshe don left his community and became a monk in a monastery far from his home.

Rdo rje worried that his mother would disapprove if he married Gangs lha, the only girl he visited at night. They loved each other. Gangs lha's family was rich and his mother often talked about how rich, powerful people disdained weak, poor people.

He vividly recalled his maternal uncle, Bkra shis, visiting after his mother had left her second husband. His uncle had looked at his nephew and admonished, "Never marry a girl from a rich family, even if she loves you and is kind to you. Her family will torture you, hold you in contempt, and will treat you as a hired herder. They will never treat you as a real family member, even if you live with them for many years."

Rdo rje, however, was addicted to gambling and having many debts, had decided not to marry Skyid mtsho, a poor family's daughter, though they had grown up together and had fallen in love when they were children. Once, when they were herding calves near a creek, he had said, "I will marry you when I'm old enough. Don't marry anyone else, or I'll become a monk."

He felt guilty and sorry as he recalled this, especially when he heard that Skyid mtsho had continued to love him and was waiting for him to bring her to his home. He knew he had few choices. The only thing he could do was to marry a rich family's daughter and pay off his debts, ignoring his mother and uncle's advice.



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Two years passed. Rdo rje and Gangs lha married and divorced.

One chilly morning Rdo rje busily was doing house chores while also caring for his daughter, who Gangs lha had left in his home after the divorce.

Mtsho mo was not sure that she should milk a weak calf's mother. She worried the calf would die if she did not let the calf nurse all its mother's milk, but she had no choice. It was the only way she could get milk for her granddaughter. She murmured complaints that Rdo rje had married Gangs lha. And then a smile appeared on her red cheeks. She remembered that Tshe ring had promised to buy her a pair of cheap fabric shoes when he returned home from his senior high school during the winter holiday.

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Tshe ring sat near the stove and talked to his mother and brother about his happy time at school. He put his head down when Rdo rje asked if the other students were kind to him. He never talked about his real relationships with others to his brother and mother. He did not want to make them worry about how badly he was treated because he was from an impoverished family.

Tshe ring sincerely did not want to trouble his family. He understood his family's situation was unlike that of rich families. He had to talk to them, however, because he needed their support to study at university, which he hoped to begin the next year.

His mother was astonished when Rdo rje said, "We should sell your riding yak to support Tshe ring's university study."

While she hoped that her son would have a good future and a happy life, she refused to sell her beloved riding yak to generate cash to pay for his study.

The next morning Tshe ring got up early and without having breakfast, drove his family's yaks into the narrow valley while the rest of his family slumbered.



## MIRROR

Gu ru 'phrin las ཀུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལགས།

Muffled, barely audible sounds emanated from a tent. Tshe kho, a father of two in his early sixties, sat cross-legged on his bed reciting scriptures. He recited for two hours every morning. He resembled a meditator with his sheepskin robe draped over his upper body and his lower body wrapped in another warm robe. When he finished, he unfolded his now-stiff legs and went outside of the tent to urinate.

Hearing a ewe bleat, he strode to the sheep pen. He wore his robe without a sash. Noticing the lower part brushing the frozen ground, he flung it over his shoulders. He guessed a ewe had probably given birth in the night and the lamb had frozen to death. He searched for a lamb's carcass but found nothing but a few bits of sheep hair and fresh bone fragments. Guessing what had happened, he began cursing his family's watchdogs.

Pad mo read anger in her husband's face as she offered him breakfast and then put a black sooty iron pot half full of water on the adobe stove in the tent.

Tshe kho ferociously said, "Our family's watchdogs are useless! Don't add a lot of flour to that pot. They need to be hungry so they are more alert. Last night, wolves attacked our sheep and killed a lamb."

Ignoring her husband, Pad mo sympathetically and surreptitiously added a generous amount of flour to the pot. Afraid to say anything directly to her husband, she quietly murmured, stressing the importance of reducing the suffering of all sentient beings.

Some days later, Tshe kho was feeling very ill. Concerned, Pad mo urged him to rest at home and promised to take good care of the sheep. However, Tshe kho worried about her little experience herding sheep. After breakfast, he dressed warmly and herded the sheep to a mountain covered with lush grass. Staring after him as he grew



smaller in the distance, Pad mo realized that he had become as thin as a scarecrow.

After supper, Pad mo sat next to her scrawny husband. She knew his health was deteriorating, even though he said he was fine. Upset about his health, she grew angrier with her youngest son, Gdor lo, who roamed about and was not filial. However, she did not talk to her husband about Gdor lo because they had argued about him and his level of concern for them.

The following day, Gdor lo's older brother, Do po, got up early and made a fire in the adobe stove in the tent he shared with his wife and children. He woke his children just as the black kettle began singing on the stove. He asked his wife, Mtsho mo, to herd the yaks. She then understood that Do po was going to the township town. Do po often went to the township town, met people from Tshe kho's community, and inquired about his parents. He felt uneasy if he did not hear about them at least once a month.

Do po felt sorry that he could not often take care of his parents and spend more time with them. He had married Mtsho mo and now lived in her community, which was far from his parents.

Gdor lo returned to his parents' home only when he heard his father was sick. As he squatted near his father's bed, Tshe kho gently stroked his son's head. Tshe kho said nothing but a big smile decorated his face.

Pad mo made *rtsam pa* and prepared a bowl of hot milk for her husband, and asked Gdor lo to have lunch with her.

Gdor lo asked his mother to take good care of his father and said he would herd the sheep.

After his son left, Tshe kho commented that Gdor lo was a good son and he was proud of him, because every time he got sick, the first person to visit was Gdor lo.

Gdor lo herded the sheep for five days. Each day the number of sheep decreased. When his mother asked why, Gdor lo explained that wolves were attacking the flock.

Pad mo did not tell her husband about the diminishing flock. She wondered why her son was willing to herd their sheep and was also puzzled as to why no vultures hovered in the sky.



Five days later, Do po arrived. When he saw his father, tears trickled from his eyes.

Tshe kho was not very glad to see him. In fact, anger seemed to color his face. Maybe it was because Do po had visited him a number of days into his illness and maybe also because he thought Do po was feigning concern and actually did not love him very much. After all, Do po had left his parents and Gdor lo to marry a girl from another community where he now lived.

Do po urged his father to go to the township clinic, but Tse kho stubbornly refused.

Do po spent several days with his parents. During that time, Tse kho seemed to be improving, so he felt very glad to be with his parents. When he left for his own home, he felt sad that his father had rejected his suggestion to have his health checked. He also understood that his father thought he was not filial.

The next day, when Tse kho got up and went out of the tent, he saw two riders galloping toward his home. Once they arrived, he asked them to dismount and welcomed them into his tent.

Instead, they shouted angrily, "Where is Gdor lo? He has given us twenty sheep in the last five days, but he owes us ten more. He was our gambling mate. We'll kill him if he doesn't give us ten more sheep in the next two days," and then they rode away in a cloud of dust.

Shocked by what he had just heard, Tse kho staggered back into the tent.

Pad mo was looking into a piece of broken mirror and had heard it all. She immediately understood why their sheep had become fewer and fewer. She also recalled the last time her husband had been ill. Gdor lo, who was the first to visit, had "kindly" offered to herd, and their sheep had also become steadily fewer. She looked at her husband dejectedly, poured warm water into a red basin, asked Tse kho to wash his face, handed him the piece of broken mirror, and said, "Here - the mirror."

Tse kho stared at the man in the mirror for a while, and then took a long, deep breath.



## HERDING PIKAS

Klu thar rgyal ལུ་ཐར་རྒྱལ།  
Dpal rgyal དཔལ་རྒྱལ། (illustrations)

I wrote this story based on childhood memories as a member of the Thang ta Tribe, Tsha nag (Chanaihai) Community, Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang ra (Guinan) County, Mtsho Iho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Born in 1993, I enjoyed catching small creatures and did not think about how they might feel. However, this changed one day when I was herding with Grandmother, whose advice and insights altered how I looked at the world. The illustrations were made by my brother, Dpal rgyal (b. 1991).<sup>1</sup>

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**N**am mkha was upset. He was standing at his family's tent entrance and thinking, "It's not going to be a good day to catch pikas. What are my playmates doing now?" He looked outside frequently, hoping the rain would stop, but was only disappointed with more rain and dense fog.

He saw some pikas dart from hole to hole when the rain finally did stop. Remembering his father's suggestion his dark mood suddenly vanished and he rushed barefoot to nearby tents calling to Bkra kho and Gser mtsho.

The fresh world brought excitement. He soon forgot his mother's warning uttered before she left to look for the yaks that had not returned home the night before: "Don't leave home, or stray dogs may come and eat our meat! If you obey me, I'll collect your favorite - fresh wild mushrooms - and cook them in butter for you."

Nam mkha promised when he heard his favorite food mentioned, but seeing the pikas made him forget his duty.

The day before, Nam mkha had herded his family's calves with Bkra kho and Gser mtsho. Bkra kho had caught two pikas and given one each to Nam mkha and Gser mtsho who were delighted

<sup>1</sup> For more on Dpal rgyal, see (Klu thar rgyal 2017).



now to have their own pet. Nam mkha brought his pika home and tied it to one of his family's tent pegs.

Later that afternoon, his mother, Chos skyid, heard her son crying while she was milking. When she asked what was the matter, Nam mkha said, "It's gone!"

"What?" Chos skyid asked in puzzlement.

"My pet! It's gone!" Nam mkha said mournfully.

"What? Your calves are all here!" Chos skyid said and resumed milking.

"Someone turned my pet pika loose," Nam mkha said

"You have so many cute calves, why do you want a pika? You shouldn't tie a pika like a dog!" Father Nor bu said from the tent. He had just returned from herding sheep.

"I was planning to take care of it," Nam mkha whimpered.

"You don't even know what kind of grass pikas eat. How are you going to feed it? Pikas don't eat what livestock eat," his father said.

Nam mkha paused, but then cried louder than before, "I want my pet back!" It seemed he would never stop sobbing.

His father suggested that he catch a cute pika the following day. Realizing he could ask Bkra kho for a pika the next day, Nam mkha stopped crying.

When he reached Gser mtsho's home, he found that she was helping her mother bake bread. "You are here! Come and let me give you some fresh bread! It's still warm!" Gser mtsho's mother said.





Nam mkha had no appetite and refused. He went to Gser mtsho, cupped his hands, and whispered in her right ear.

"My pet also escaped," she whispered back. She was upset.

"Let's ask Bkra kho for more pikas," Bkra kho whispered.

They both cheered up. Then, Gser mtsho suddenly said, "But not now. Mother needs my help...."

"What are you talking about?" Gser mtsho's mother demanded

"Nothing. I'm just asking her to come play after baking the bread," Bkra kho said. He then turned to Gser mtsho and whispered, "Don't worry! We'll get a cute one for you."

Nam mkha rushed to Bkra kho's family tent where he learned that Bkra kho was herding his family's sheep with his father on the mountains, and wouldn't return until late afternoon. Bkra kho, disappointed, returned home. He thought if he grew up quickly, he could herd sheep with his pika like Bkra kho.

Watching pikas running about near his tent, he decided to catch one by himself, but when he got near, they ran into their holes. He waited near a hole a pika had just gone inside, but it didn't come out, no matter how long he waited. Nam mkha realized that pika holes were everywhere and that they ran into a hole whenever he



chased them. The pikas were very alert and could run fast. He then thought catching a pika was the hardest job in the world!

Sometime later Choe skyid returned from the mountains, with red cheeks and a face damp from the rain. "Nam mkha, I'm back. I found our missing yaks and I also brought some fresh wild mushrooms!"

However, Nam mkha seemed disinterested. "Bkra kho is herding sheep on the mountains so I won't get a pika today," Nam mkha said, his head between his shoulders.

"Don't catch pikas! You'll hurt them! All our family's calves are yours. You don't need another pet," his mother advised.

"Calves are cute, but they're bigger than me. I don't want to be their pet!" he said, which made his mother laugh.

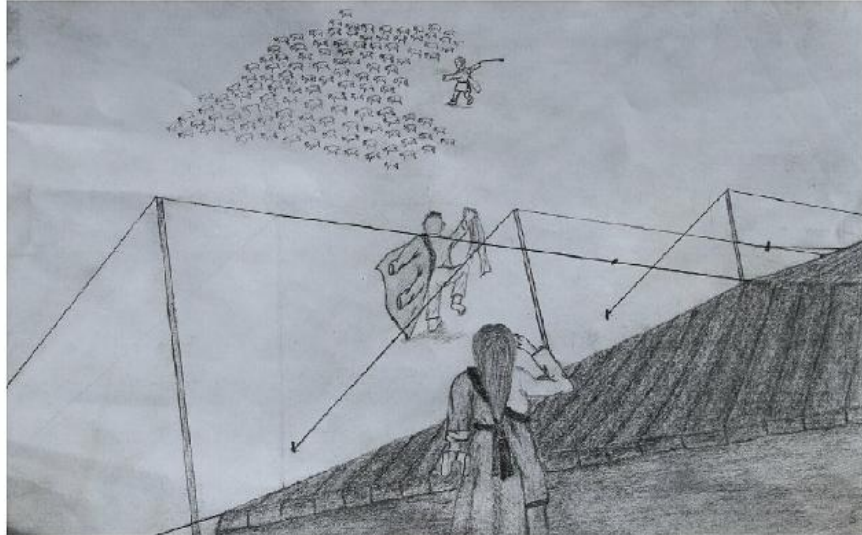
"Would you like to eat mushrooms with butter or should I fry them with meat?" she asked while taking off her wet robe and putting on a dry one.

Nam mkha heard Bkra kho's shout and raced out of the tent. "Nam mkha, where are you going? I'm about to cook mushrooms for you!" his mother shouted from the tent.

Nam mkha saw Bkra kho coming from the mountains and rushed toward him, shouting, "Mother, I'll eat later!"

"Put on your shoes!" his mother yelled, coming out of the tent, holding Nam mkha's shoes, but then realized Nam mkha was already gone with Bkra kho.





Nam mkha was delighted when he learned Bkra kho would herd calves the next day and would get a pika for him. "How many pikas did you catch today?" Nam mkha asked.

"None. There are no pikas on the mountain," Bkra kho said.

"Really? I didn't know that," Nam mkha said curiously.

"They don't go to the mountains, unless their food runs out at the foot of the mountains," Bkra kho lectured.

"It would be great if they were on the mountains. I'll take my pika to the mountains when I'm able to herd sheep," Nam mkha said.

"Grandfather said it's hard for pikas to live on the mountains. Do you know why?" Bkra kho asked.

"Because they need to return to the foot of the mountains for water every day, like calves?" Nam mkha speculated after a few moments.

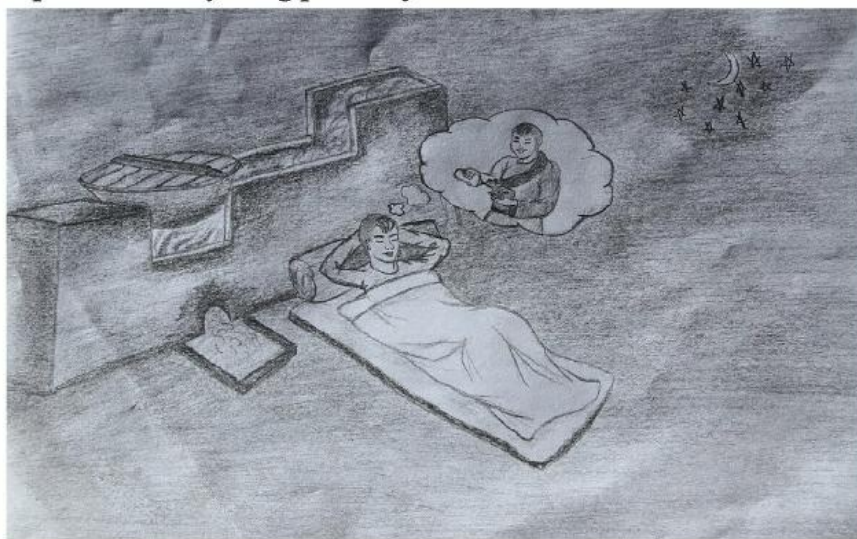
"Ha! Pikas can live with little water. Grandfather said that if pikas build their holes on the mountain slope, then the wind easily blows inside and then they can't stay there. It's hard for pikas," explained Bkra kho.

As they neared Bkra kho's tent, Bkra kho whispered, "Don't mention pikas in front of my family members."

Nam mkha nodded.



That night, Nam mkha couldn't sleep, imagining what kind of pika he was going to get the following day. After a long period of thought, he decided to ask for a baby pika and then feed it yak milk. He planned everything perfectly.



It was a sunny day with birds chirping here and there. Nam mkha drove his calves near a small stream where his playmates' calves were happily nibbling on grass. He could finally herd his calves with his playmates again. As Nam mkha ran to Bkra kho and Gser mtsho, he noticed some pikas running, looking for a hole to hide in. Others stuck their heads out of their holes, watching him.

"Today is a good day to catch pikas. I'll have my own pika again soon!" Nam mkha thought.

"I want a baby pika today. I'll feed it with yak milk!" Nam mkha said to Bkra kho.

"I also want a baby pika!" Gser mtsho chimed in

Bkra kho promised to catch a young pika for each of them, but not a baby, because baby pikas wouldn't come out of the hole until they were able to eat grass.

Nam mkha and his playmates' job seemed very easy, but some calves energetically tried to escape and were a challenge to herd. Still, they had ample time to play together.



"Follow me!" called Bkra kho later and led Nam mkha and Gser mtsho to a flat area near the stream, where there were many pikas. Bkra kho suddenly rushed toward the pikas, which ran into their holes. Nam mkha and Gser mtsho followed. Some squeezed together down one hole as others continued running, trying to find a hole. Nam mkha laughed at Bkra kho, who made all the pikas flee into their holes as he had the day before.

Bkra kho then told Nam mkha and Gser mtsho to use their shoes and hats to cover the pika holes near them. Next, Bkra kho stuck his hand into a hole and soon pulled a pika out of a hole by its hind leg, and then another one. Nam mkha and Gser mtsho were surprised and excited. Bkra kho handed Gser mtsho the end of a string after he had tied the pika to the other end of the string.

"My hand is short, I can't get one," Nam mkha complained, after lying near a pika hole and sticking his hand inside.

Bkra kho laughed and said, "It depends on how big the pile of earth is in front of each hole. If the pile is bigger, it means that the hole is deeper. If there is very little earth, it means the hole is shallow. Broken and old holes are shallow. Young, unlucky pikas easily miss their own holes when they are in a panic."

Nam mkha stood up and went to check some other holes.





"Now let's move on to our second plan!" Bkra kho announced, after checking some nearby holes

"Second plan?" Nam mkha and Gser mtsho said simultaneously, looking at each other.

"We will catch more pikas," Bkra kho said.

Nam mkha and Gser mtsho, though still curious, felt their sense of excitement increase.

Bkra kho then chose a pika hole for Nam mkha and told him to stay there. Meanwhile, selecting another hole for himself Bkra kho stuck his hand inside.

"Are you ready to blow into the hole? Remember to use all your breath and blow constantly," commanded Bkra kho.

"OK!" Nam mkha said in nervous excitement.

Nam mkha blew several times and Bkra kho soon pulled a pika out of the hole by its head.

"How did the pika get into your hand when I blew here? Are these holes connected?" Nam mkha asked.

"Yes, they are connected underground sometimes. My uncle taught me this skill," Nam mkha explained proudly.

Gser mtsho looked admiringly at Bkra kho.

Nam mkha then told Bkra kho to blow into the hole as he was putting his hand inside. Bkra kho chose a hole for Nam mkha and then one for himself. Nam mkha stuck his right hand into the hole and although Bkra kho constantly blew into the hole, Nam mkha caught nothing. Bkra kha tried another hole, after removing a shoe they had used to block the hole. As Bkra kho blew, a cold-wet nose suddenly touched the middle of Nam mkha's right palm. Clutching a pika's head he pulled it out of the hole. Nam mkha was elated at having made his first catch.

Nam kha and Gser mtsho now each had two pikas. Nam mkha kept the younger one and let the other go.

Nam mkha tied his pika with a string that he had prepared and forced it to move back and forth. Gser mtsho was also busy with her pikas. Both were so distracted they almost forgot their calves. Suddenly, Nam mkha's young pika vanished into a hole. Nam mkha



pulled back on the string and then burst into tears. Gser mtsho followed suit.

Bkra kho heard his playmates' sobs as he quietly sat near a small hole, waiting for a *sre mong* 'yellow weasel'. Bkra kho knew he would be famous among his peers if he caught a weasel because it was much harder than catching a pika. Weasels would also try to bite you. They were far more dangerous than pikas.

"What's the matter?" Bkra kho inquired.

"My pika died. It stopped moving after it went into this hole," Nam mkha sobbed.

"I thought a calf had kicked you! I was just about to catch a weasel. I had waited for more than half an hour. Your crying chased it away," Bkra kho complained. Then he added, "You jerked the string back when the pika went inside the hole, didn't you? You broke its neck."

Nam mkha and Gser mtsho then wailed even more loudly

"Don't cry so hard over a dead pika! I didn't cry about losing a weasel. You can catch a younger pika tomorrow!" Bkra kho complained.

They both then stopped bawling.

The next day was also sunny. However, Bkra kho needed to drive his family's sheep to the mountain. Meanwhile, Nam mkha and Gser mtsho drove their calves and Bkra kho's family's calves near the stream.

As they were trying to catch some pikas, Nam mkha suddenly suggested, "Wait for me here. I'll be back soon!" and then he left without Gser mtsho having time to ask why.

Nam mkha ran to his family's tent secretly. His mother was busy churning milk in front of the tent and frequently looking into the distance. Nam mkha went to the back of the tent without his mother noticing. He crawled under the back flap as he heard his mother counting the number of churns, "Ninety-eight, ninety-nine..."

Nam mkha quickly located what he was looking for - the family's *khol mo* 'goat leather bellows', which were near the stove. He grabbed the bellows and came out from the back of the tent.



His mother was still churning, having noticed nothing. Nam mkha knew his mother would scold him if she learned he had used the bellows to catch pikas. His heart pounded as he brought the bellows back to the stream.

Gser mtsho was puzzled when she saw Nam mkha dragging the goat-skin bellows, unable to make a connection between the bellows and catching pikas.

"You'll know soon!" Nam mkha said when she asked him. He was exhausted from pulling the bellows.

He told Gser mtsho to cover all the nearby pika holes, as he took off his own shoes to cover two holes. Gser mtsho hurriedly used yak dung and stones near them and they had soon covered all the holes around them.

Nam mkha chose one hole and told Gser mtsho to get ready. He handed the bellows to her, went to a hole, and stuck his right hand in. As expected, when Gser mtsho operated the bellows a pika soon thrust its head into Nam mkha's hand. Catching pikas was now easy for them. They each got four young pikas in a short amount of time, tied each to a string, and tried to drive them here and there, pretending that they were their livestock.

Nam mkha led his pikas to where there was plenty of grass, and watched, hoping to learn which grass they ate. However, the pikas ate nothing. One of the young pikas died accidentally while he was leading them to various clumps of grass. Nam mkha didn't feel sorry, because he thought there were many pikas and he could easily catch another. He also forgot about feeding young pikas with yak milk.

When one of Gser mtsho's pikas died, Gser mtsho also didn't cry or feel sorry. She thought she could ask Bkra kho or Nam mkha for as many pikas as she wished.

In the afternoon, when it was time to drive the calves back home, Nam mkha released his pikas, since a second young pika had also died. Gser mtsho also released her "livestock." They were thinking about how to catch more pikas the next day.

As Nam mkha drove his family's calves back home, he happily complimented himself on his pika-catching skills. Later, he heard his



mother say, "I've looked for our bellows everywhere! Why didn't I notice they were right here?"

Nam mkha and his playmates continued catching pikas. Other playmates were attracted. They then competed to see whose group could catch the most pikas. This resulted in many injured and dead pikas.

One day, Nam mkha's parents went on pilgrimage for a few days and asked the grandmother to stay in their tent. His younger uncle tended the family's livestock, but Nam mkha still needed to herd the calves.

In the afternoon, the grandmother went to meet Nam mkha near the stream where he and Gser mtsho were playing. She was shocked when she saw ten pikas tied near them. She shouted, ordering Nam mkha to release them immediately. He did so but didn't understand why catching pikas was wrong.

"Boy, you shouldn't catch them. It will harm them. You want your mother to return soon, don't you?" his grandmother asked.

"Yes!" Nam mkha replied, hoping for his mother's early return. She had promised him a lot of candy. He still had no idea of a connection between his mother and pikas.

"Good! Most pikas are mothers, and they come out looking for food. Their babies are yearning for their mother's return, just like you want your mother to return. Never catch pikas again unless you don't need your own mother!" the grandmother concluded

Nam mkha suddenly cried, realizing that he made a huge mistake. "I want Mother!" he bawled.

"Your parents are returning tomorrow. Come! Let's drive the calves back home," the grandmother said, patting Nam mkha's head.

Nam mkha stopped crying when he heard that his parents were returning. He watched the scampering pikas with a regretful expression while walking home with the grandmother.

The following afternoon, as Nam mkha drove the calves home, he saw his parents returning. He rushed to his mother and hugged her robe sleeve tightly. When she asked him if he had missed his parents, Nam mkha held her sleeve even more tightly but didn't reply.

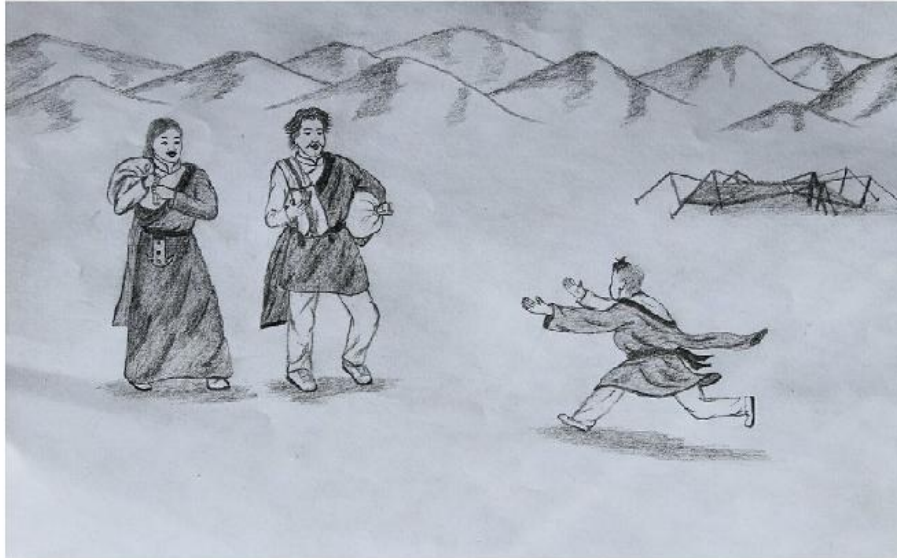


When his father asked where he was herding the calves, he said, "Gser mtsho and I persuaded our playmates to herd the calves where there are fewer pikas, at the lower part of the mountains, which is also far from our milk yaks!"

"Why did you drive them there? It's easier to herd calves on flat grassland," his mother asked.

"I don't want the calves to eat the pikas' grass because the pikas would then have to make their homes on mountain slopes after their grass runs out at the bottom of the mountain. Then the wind would kill them or make them ill!" Nam mkha said confidently.

"You are right!" his father said, patting Nam mkha's head.



His parents were surprised and pleased. They felt their son had matured in just a few days.

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## A DAY IN THE GARDEN

Blo bzang ལྷོ་བཟང་།

I was born in 1989 in Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Village, Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Township, Ya rdzi (Xunhua) Salar (Sala) Autonomous County, Mtsho shar (Haidong) City, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China. I wrote this story based on my memories of living in Xi'an City.

...

**M**y six AM alarm sounded. I got up, dressed, took my bag, and went to Shaanxi Normal University to study in a small garden surrounded by a low, faded-red brick wall. There were entrances on the east and west sides, and at the front of the garden. Trees, bamboo, grass, and flowers burst with vibrant colors. Birds perched on branches chirped constantly. Bird feathers further adorned the garden. Concrete benches and tables were scattered about. The garden was quiet. I arrived, sat on a bench, took out a book from my worn yak-hair bag, and started to study vocabulary and some sentences I found difficult to understand.

In one corner, a girl read a book in English while pacing here and there. A woman in her early fifties exercised in another corner. A middle-aged man brandished a ceremonial sword near the west entrance of the garden, giving a nice display of martial art skills. We were all busy and didn't disturb one another. At around seven-forty, my temporary companions began leaving this lovely garden. I was alone.

This small world grew quieter. A breeze gently touched my face, helping me to commit to memory the English I was concentrating on.

I began reading a story. Suddenly, a strong gust of wind bothered me. I raised my head and looked around. Still, just me. Leaves floated in the air, creating notes like those of musicians quietly playing their instruments. It was a very attractive sound. Grass and flowers swayed in the warm air, like dancers. I calmly sat, enjoying this natural concert. Later, the garden grew silent again.

I continued reading my story.



Three children suddenly ran into the garden, rushing here and there, squealing as they chased one another, disturbing the garden's silence and me. These children wore lovely, sincere smiles. Some minutes later, their mothers came announcing, "It's time to go home."

One child protested, saying she wanted to play longer.

Her mother repeated, "It's time to return home," again and again.

The little girl refused to comply and ran away when her mother reached out to grab her. The mother then chased her around a big tree in the garden center. The ensuing game resembled a cat chasing a mouse. The other mothers and children watched and giggled. I also laughed, but quietly. The fat, slow mother couldn't catch her agile daughter. Finally, the overweight mother stopped and panted, "Let's go home."

The little girl stood some distance from her mother and said, "Let me play for five more minutes, OK?"

"No!" her mother bellowed.

The little girl repeated, "Mother, let me play for a few more minutes, OK?"

"Let her play a bit longer," I murmured, knowing no one would hear me.

The mother again refused. The daughter then slowly approached her mother, took her hand, and reluctantly left the garden with her playmates. I soon left because it was lunchtime.

...

At around two-thirty that afternoon, I returned and sat on a stone stool under a tree. Although the sunlight was strong, the leaves provided me with a cool environment. In this undisturbed, quiet atmosphere I started to read a story with good concentration.

Time passed; the sunlight's intensity diminished and the air noticeably cooled. A young woman entered the garden, pushing an old woman in a wheelchair. She had faded hair, a pale face, and looked very frail. They stopped by a plot of flowers. A little girl holding some snacks followed them. The two women started talking. When the little girl offered a snack to her mother, she shook her head.



The girl then sat on a stone chair and started munching on some of the snacks she had brought.

The young woman talked and the old lady listened carefully but said little. Sometimes she nodded her head and looked at her daughter in an intimate way.

After a few minutes, the old woman gripped the wheelchair and tried to stand up. Her daughter helped and the little girl also came to assist. The old lady couldn't walk very well. Then she sat back in the wheelchair and rested. She looked exhausted. This threesome soon left the garden.

Meanwhile, a gentle breeze rose and the flowers and leaves bobbed about. It seemed they were conscious of something I was not. I lowered my head and continued reading.

As the sun dimmed, the flowers trembled as though they were worried. I wanted to finish my reading before dusk. Just then a young couple arrived, laughing and chatting. Hand in hand they sat on stone stools opposite me, murmuring. Suddenly, it was silent.

"Have the lovers gone?" I thought and raised my head. Gosh! The flowers were bowing their heads. I bowed my head, too, my heart pounding. I swiftly walked away, leaving that garden of so many human passions to the lovers.

As I returned to my apartment beneath dim lamplight I reflected on the day's events.



## SGROL MA

Mkha' 'gro 'tsho མཁའ་གྲོ་ཐོ་རཞོ་རཞོ་

Mkha' 'gro 'tsho writes: This story is about my friend, Sgrol ma (b. 1992), a mother living in Bzhag Idom (Redangba) Township, Mdzod dge (Ruoergai) Autonomous County, Rnga ba (Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China.

...

I hadn't seen my old friend, Sgrol ma, for several years so I decided to visit her in the winter of 2016-2017. My travels and a few years living outside of the township that we had both grown up in had taken me further and further away from my old life. Even when I lived in the area, the hustle and bustle of my busy life meant that I had little chance to head out into the countryside where she lived and catch up. However, that winter I found myself with a couple of days free, so I got a lift in my nephew's old truck and stayed the night in her small winter tent high up on the Plateau. The weather was colder there, but I felt at home when I breathed that chilly air. I felt stronger and more alive.

During my time at Sgrol ma's tent, I got to know her better. I asked detailed questions about her life, relishing the opportunity to talk about the differences between her life and mine, and to better understand her thoughts about her herding life.

Early on in our conversations, she mentioned that she admired me.

"Why?" I asked, somewhat confused.

She explained that she considered me to be well-educated, and thought that I might be able to help our community by translating between our local language and Chinese because locals generally had limited fluency in Chinese. She suggested that I might be able to help illiterates in need and added that I also had the ability to chat with people of various backgrounds and make them feel comfortable. She elaborated saying, "You are different from local students. You have a good attitude that positively impacts others in our community. Your education has made you humble and respectful



of others. Many of the educated youth denigrate illiterates."

I smiled and didn't say anything about my educational background. After a while, wanting to learn more about my friend, I mumbled, "You are also very worthy."

"Me? I'm just an ordinary, illiterate woman," she replied softly, shaking her head.

"Why didn't you attend primary school?" I asked curiously.

"You know I'm the only girl in my family. My parents thought it was better to keep me at home, milking yaks, making butter and cheese, and raising children," she replied.

"But even only-daughters are entitled to a primary school education. It's the law," I said.

"My parents paid some money 'under the table' to the local government in order to obtain a middle school degree for me. I never actually attended school," she continued.

Silence hung heavy in the tent. The weight of what she had just said sat uncomfortably with me.

"How long have you been here alone on the mountain? Why don't you have any neighbors?" I asked.

"In 2010, the government divided the land among the local families. My family was assigned to live here. I stay alone throughout most of the long winter. It is far from even our closest neighbor, my cousin. He lives over there," she said, pointing to a house that was only a speck in the distance. I guessed it would take at least an hour for her to walk there.

"Several decades ago, we all shared this area and herded our animals across large distances. Then the land was divided based on the number of livestock a family owned. Some had less, and some had more. To make matters worse, some of the poorer families feel that the land division was unfair. This creates more tensions between local families," she concluded.

We were both silent for a while. To lighten the mood, I said that I needed to find a boyfriend, but couldn't find a suitable one.

"Don't hurry!" she said, laughing.

"We are the same age, but I have no children," I added with a smile.



"Do you think that having three fatherless children is ideal?" she asked sharply.

"What happened?" I asked.

Then, as she began to describe her relationship with her husband, I took these notes:

Sgrol ma, a herder and milker, grew up in Ho thA Community, which is located at the foot of a rocky mountain that locals called Dkar po sman rdza 'White Mountain of Wild Herbs'. It has this name because local Tibetan doctors collect plants and flowers here to make Tibetan medicine. Local herders graze their yaks, sheep, and horses here. Locals also often climb up here to enjoy the view. In summer, it is a favorite place for sightseeing. Some families camp on the mountain in their tents for two or three days to better enjoy the view of the surrounding villages, mountains, forests, and vast grassland colored by a variety of flowers and plants.

Sgrol ma has a big round face and two large dark eyes. Slim and tall, she wears her hair twisted into an elegant long black braid. She is twenty-five years old and illiterate. Her family has thirty yaks, fifteen of which she milks every day. Each winter, her parents slaughter one or two yaks to ensure that her family members have enough meat for the whole year. There are eight people in her family: Sgrol Ma, her parents, her husband, and her children - a boy of three, a girl of five, and another boy who is eight years old.

Sgrol ma first became pregnant when she was seventeen. One of her cousins suggested to her parents that her future husband was a good man. This convinced her to marry him. Her husband is a year older than she is. In the beginning, she felt her husband was fine. He stayed at home herding and helping her during the day. Gradually, things changed, and she was less happy. He began drinking, smoked excessively and did little to help her around the home. Instead, he spent most of his time sleeping or going to the county town to hang out with his friends. His bad habits drove her nuts. Their relationship deteriorated.

She said, "Those crazy friends of his were always phoning him. My husband is a good follower just like an obedient dog. He has one very rich friend who is particularly stupid. One day, my husband went to town



to gamble and lost 20,000 RMB. A few days later, some young men came here and asked for sheep and yaks to repay his debts. I refused. I told them 'Find my husband and ask him to pay the debts. This is my home, not his'."

Sgrol ma milked yaks, collected yak dung and cooked. She seemed satisfied, even though she did this work alone. No one in her family thought she needed their help. Her parents and children thought that her husband was with her, herding and protecting the livestock.

This reminded me of my sister-in-law, who led this sort of life for a long time when I was growing up. My older brother was absent for long periods, even several months at a time. He also often abused her. We cared about her. She was like a mother to me. Whenever she had pocket money, she gave it to me and told me to buy snacks, notebooks, pens, pencils, and so on. When she had some problems with my brother, she never mentioned it to my father.

Sgrol ma was ashamed of her situation and went to great lengths to hide it from her parents, who stayed in the town. In their free time, they went to Khang gasar Monastery to chant and circumambulate in the hope that this would help them have a better life after their death, and also be happier and enjoy good health in their remaining years.

After every sunset, she slept alone in her small yak-hair tent. It was smaller and warmer than the tent she lived in during the summer.

In winter, she lived far from her own parents and had little free time to visit them. If she took a private car, it took two hours to reach their house. If she rode a horse, it took two or three times longer. She lived in the tent without electricity or the solar-powered lights that many other local Tibetans had been using for over a decade. This was probably because she didn't know how to use electrical appliances and because she thought that it was unnecessary. She seemed to be punishing herself and deliberately leading a simple life.

It was pitch black and very quiet in her tent at night. She was used to it and didn't complain. Each morning at dawn, she got up and began milking and collecting yak dung. She never asked her three children for help. Her oldest child attended a boarding primary school in



the nearest town. She rarely saw him. Her other two children were cared for by her parents and were used to a comfortable life in town. None of the children were interested in living with their mother on the mountain. She felt guilty that she wasn't raising her own children.

One evening, when her husband came home with some of his friends, her unhappiness came to a head.

"Cook for us. Don't sleep until my friends are gone," her husband commanded.

"I want to rest. I have a lot to do tomorrow," she replied.

"How dare you sleep if you haven't finished cooking!" he bellowed.

"I'm so tired! You never help with the milking. I must wake up early," she said.

"Go to Hell if you don't want to cook for us!" he yelled.

"Do whatever you want," she returned.

"I will leave with my friends and never come back!" he shouted.

He left and did not return for three months. During that time, she sang loudly while she milked in the morning and in the afternoon. She cooked noodles with dried yak meat. She thought, "Dried yak meat is the most nutritious and delicious meat in the world."

She cooked by herself and ate by herself. "It's better to eat by myself rather than having my husband's company. If he was at home, we would argue," she thought.

In the evening, she made butter and cheese. While doing her chores, she felt as if she were smelling the sweetest flowers in the world. And when she went to bed, she felt she was in Heaven. In her dreams, she had wonderful wings and flew in a blue sky. There were no neighbors with whom to communicate. She said that she had gotten used to this isolated lifestyle.

Others in the community often gathered, particularly during religious observations throughout the year, for example, during the women's festival held in the fifth lunar month. Women brought jerky, *gro ma* 'small wild yams', milk, yogurt, and fresh cheese.

She said, "My favorite food at this time is made from dried *gro ma*, fresh yak milk, dry cheese, and a little salt. Mix these ingredients together and boil for almost an hour. Then once the cheese is cooked, it



is ready to eat. It is delicious and nutritious and there are no artificial ingredients. Only at special festivals like this do we have the opportunity to eat.

"Locals don't often eat this food because women prefer to save some milk and cheese to exchange for money and valuable items, particularly *gro ma*. Making this special dish requires a lot of energy and time, and it is hard to find this time in the summer when everyone is busy with other work."

Whenever this festival came, Sgrol ma went home. The first time, she convinced her father to come to the tent and tend the livestock. She offered various excuses as to why her husband couldn't be there. Sgrol ma then had a chance to have a good time with her peers. When the festival ended, her father returned to his wife and the children, and Sgrol ma resumed her usual life.

Her husband returned three months after he had stormed out. She first knew something was amiss when the robe that she used as a blanket in the night was pulled off. That robe kept her warm day and night. Shocked and cold, she realized that her husband had returned, and without saying a word he wanted to exercise his right as a husband. In silence, Sgrol ma left the tent and looked at the sky. Clad in her t-shirt and thick black underwear, she counted the bright stars.

She decided later that she should talk to him. "Collecting yak dung, milking yaks, and making cheese and butter are my best friends," she said.

He stared at her and then began beating her roughly with a stick until she fell onto the tent floor. It wasn't the first time that he had beaten her. She knew that fighting back would anger him further.

"It's better if you die in my lifetime," he said angrily, and then he left.

One day passed.

One month was gone.

One year.

He would probably never return.

"I am so sorry that my children are not with their parents, but I can't be sorry that he has left. Now I have the life I want, living alone and doing the work I am supposed to do with nobody beating me."



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The next day, my nephew came to pick me up. When I was ready to leave, Sgrol ma gave me a big bottle of fresh milk, and small pieces of butter wrapped in white cheesecloth. She smiled and said, "Take care of yourself wherever you go."

I didn't say anything. I looked into her dark eyes and smiled. My heart was full and sorrowful after hearing her story. Afraid I would cry if I said anything, I left in silence.

On the way back home, I remained quiet; my head full of Sgrol ma's story. I realized how wonderful my life was. I had a loving family, even though I had no mother. I had also attended prestigious schools. I had passion. I could choose my partner, and, most importantly, I had opportunities to pursue my own future.

In contrast, Sgrol ma, with little formal education and very little knowledge of the Chinese language, had fewer options. Still, she had rid herself of an abusive husband and declared that she was happy living a traditional Tibetan way of life. Her family's income depended on her hard work. She hoped that once her children grew up, they would appreciate and care for her.



## THE MONLAM FLOWER

Dgos 'dod nor bu དགོས་འདོད་ནོར་བུ།

I was born on 30 January 1995 in a herding area in Hu ra 'gab ma (Xiahalama) Village, A mchog (Anqu) Township, Khyung mchu (Hongyuan) County, Rnga ba (Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. Each year in my home grassland area, monlam flowers (*Primula fasciculata* Balf. f. et Ward)<sup>1</sup> bloom at the beginning of spring and again



at the end of summer. My grandmother (1956-2006) told me this story when I was a child and we were herding on the grassland together. She also taught me how to use an 'ur rdo 'long sling' and prayer beads. I later heard similar versions of this story from other family members:

Monlam Flower wanted to see all the flowers bloom in the spring. He thought it must be wonderful to see all the flowers blooming on the grassland, so he came to the world very early one year. To his surprise, he found he was the only blossom in the world. He prayed to bloom again so that he could see all the flowers bloom. And he did bloom again, but it was, once more, at the wrong time and he saw no other blossoms. He missed the beautiful moment on the grassland when many flowers bloom. The second time he bloomed it was after all the flowers had withered. He thus became the first and last flower to bloom each year.


I composed this text in 2017 while a student at Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Normal University.

Read the text from bottom to top and then from top to bottom.

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<sup>1</sup> In April 2017, my father, Bkra shis don 'grub (b. 1975), photographed these flowers in my home community.



 had a dream: I was walking on my homeland among majestic, sky-piercing mountains, on untamed grassland that was becoming emerald green. Only a few soft, white clouds idled in the pale blue sky.

Yaks were enjoying succulent, nutritious grass fed by pure water while switching busy tails.

Pink monlam flowers bloomed here and there on the moist grassland. Hard ice became soft water that soberly flowed with a sound you'll never forget.

Wild wind became gentle, warmly caressing my face. Mischievous little lambs frolicked cheerfully. Cuckoos sang from unknown places.

A man sang love songs to a girl fetching a pail of water on the opposite bank of a smooth-curved brook.

Long, black hair in a single braid glistened down her back.

Grey threads of smoke wafted from a black yak-hair tent near her.

Slowly I realized I was dreaming.

I was terrified of suddenly waking.

I could go into every nook and cranny of this age-old place beyond the limits of space and time.

I was a current of air traveling wherever I wanted with invisible feet, wings walking on petals of clouds, flying above an undulating meadow.

Nevertheless, my eyes opened.

I was not walking my homeland.

Mountains and grasslands were gone.

White clouds were distant puffs.

Black yak hair-tents were empty silence.

Sweet songs and warm faces were vague as mist.

I'd yearned to be an agile and incredibly free soul returned to the past.

I saw a future so far away I couldn't make my present gallop.

I got up that cloudy morning.

Washed, walked, so-called worked, like a man or a machine in the washed-out world.



---

Forgetting most of what I had dreamt, but the lovely, little pink  
monlam flower and its faint fragrance remained etched in my  
memory.

Strange that it made me feel like I was in another dream as time  
passed.

When I recalled those overlapping dreams, I was utterly confused.

I trifled away my time as the walking dead do.

From spring to autumn, I tried waking again, again, again.

But I was locked in so miserably.

My brain was like an ocean with a rough and heavy backwash, pulling  
me ever deeper into perplexity.

The little monlam flowers receded far from my sky.

One sunny morning, I woke up in bed.

Went to wash my face as usual.

A miracle!

Water flowed through my cupped palms.

I looked in the mirror.

Empty.

My face, hair, body, everything was gone.

I looked at my bed.

My body still lay there with a face radiating joy.

I was unafraid.

The odor of monlam flowers grew stronger.

My body started to rise as light as a feather, unfettered by gravity's  
pull.

I could move my body freely wherever I wanted.

Yes!

I could go faster than birds.

Monlam flower petals resembling a baby's grin drifted in the air from  
some unknown place.

Clutching at these petals, I floated up to the clouds, like a honeybee  
chasing pollen, like a dancer with wishes.

When I held some of the petals, I could not help laughing without  
rhyme or reason.



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Suddenly, I was like a falling stone.  
My past flowed by like water running down a river.  
A detailed chain of branching memories.  
I saw my parents becoming younger and younger.  
My sisters and peers were becoming younger and smaller and finally  
    could only crawl.  
Big, tall buildings shrank.  
Crowded streets became wider and wider.  
The roads were shorter and shorter.  
The trees in the forests were growing and the birds were beginning  
    again to sweetly sing.  
Vehicles transformed into yaks and horses.  
Construction site racket ceased.  
People smiled like my dear monlam flowers - blooming, transforming  
    their hard, downtrodden faces.  
The sky brightened clear and unequivocal.  
Teachers put down their pointers.  
Students' knitted eyebrows relaxed.

I went back home from school.  
I no longer read nor wrote.  
I only recognized the mother who had nursed me.  
The places I traveled were nowhere but a black yak hair tent giving  
    me warmth in winter and pleasant coolness in summer.

I forgot the story of the monlam flower that Grandmother had told  
    me heaps of times in my mother tongue - Tibetan.  
I wail so loudly.



A GOOD PERSON IS HARD TO FIND<sup>1</sup>

Rdo rje don grub རོ་རྗེ་དོན་གུབ།

I heard this story from a villager (b. 1937). He and the main character lived at the same time. I created this story based on what the elder told me and what I imagined.

...

**B**lack clouds rambled in the sky, crowding each other, shifting shapes at unpredictable speed, as though a fearful giant might soon rise up among them. The wind, heavily laden with dust, howled viciously, seemingly intent on obliterating all creatures and objects on earth. It seemed almost impossible to take even one step in opposition to this powerful force. Nothing alleviated Rdo mtsho's anger and resentment toward her relatives as she began a hazardous journey along a trail meandering into the distance.

Rdo mtsho was eighty-five and dwelt within an ever-shrinking body that she fully realized would soon be a non-living entity. Her walking stick had been a constant companion for about fifteen years. She relied on it whenever she moved. Her disheveled hair resembled thinning winter grass. Her intimidating, gnarled face framed dissatisfied eyes that were nearly invisible amid thick wrinkles. She wore a tattered Tibetan robe that had been on her back for at least a decade. Its broken hem brushed the ground rhythmically as she trudged along the path. Sweat trickled down her sunburned cheeks, mingling with dust, becoming smears that she wiped away with stained sleeves. She wore a silver earring in her left ear; its mate had been torn years ago and could no longer hold an earring. Two front teeth protruded; others stood tidily at attention in straight lines. They seemed to be false, but were not, for she had never even been to the county town.

<sup>1</sup> Rka phug Rdo rje don grub. 2014. A Good Person is Hard to Find in *Farmers, Fugitives, Ghosts, and Exploding Grasshoppers: Everyday Life in Horse Race Village, a Tibetan Community on the Yellow River*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 33:148-155.



She moved forward as sluggishly as a turtle. The wind opposed her, but she confidently forged onward with the help of her trusty walking stick. Occasionally, when the wind blew in exceptionally powerful gusts that howled down the trail, she stood leaning into the wind to maintain her balance.

She walked for hours away from the home where she had stayed. She did not feel cold, though it was winter. Constant walking warmed her. Dusk had fallen by the time she reached the home of her brother, Skal bzang.

"What happened, Sister? How did you get here?" Skal bzang asked in amazement.

"I walked," Rdo mtsho said tears glistening.

"What's wrong?" Skal bzang asked.

Rdo mtsho was unable to do anything but whisper incoherently. She blinked rapidly as pearl-sized tears welled up in her wizened eyes, as though they were summer springs, again to be wiped with damp sleeves. Finally, she managed, "Your brother, Rgyal mtshan, mistreated me. He didn't bring me breakfast for two days."

"How could this be? He promised to bring you every meal on time after he received two bags of flour and 1,000 RMB from the local government, plus ten head of livestock from you," Skal bzang said.

"Yes, he should have done what he promised. I'm over eighty," Rdo mtsho declared furiously.

"That's right!" Skal bzang agreed.

"He promised!" Rdo mtsho said tearfully.

Skal bzang fell silent. Realizing his chance had come, he seemed to be making a plan. As the seventy-year-old father of two adult children, he worried his sister might go elsewhere. Skal bzang quickly prepared a bed for Rdo mtsho, bringing out his family's best blankets and carpets, enthusiastically playing the role of a concerned, benevolent brother.

Skal bzang could not sleep that night. He turned from side to side wondering if his sister would stay, knowing he would benefit from what would come with her if she did. Rdo mtsho's host family received bags of wheat, cash, and livestock from Rdo mtsho's many



relatives. He was happy she had come to him. Her arrival meant new wealth for his family.

Skal bzang rose early the next morning with suppressed excitement and, without washing, strode to Rdo mtsho's bedroom, eager to assure himself that this newfound "treasure" was still in his hands. He knocked, opened the door, and panicked when he saw she was gone. He rushed out, searched for fresh footprints, and was reassured to see Rdo mtsho enjoying the warmth of the budding radiant sun. She glanced at the eastern horizon as smoke from village chimneys increasingly shrouded the area. A few villagers herded livestock onto adjacent mountains to graze. Bleats from a flock of sheep driven by a girl caught her attention, reminding her of a past when she had been a beautiful flower, herding sheep on boundless, verdant grassland.

...

It was a summer afternoon and local villagers were hurriedly rounding up their livestock from the pastures. Rdo mtsho stood atop a small mountain covered with lush vegetation, and then walked downslope, rotating her slingshot above her head, flinging an occasional pebble at an errant sheep, humming an ancient melody as she moved along. Her homespun Tibetan robe was tight enough to outline pert breasts. Her long black hair swayed in the breeze, resembling willow branches riding a spring breeze. When she smiled, people were reminded of a rose blossom. She was indeed a glittering translucent diamond and every young man in the village dreamed of bedding or marrying her.

She put a heavy wooden bucket on her back every morning and went to a clean brook near her home to fetch water. Though she was a bit unkempt in the early morning, it could not detract from her beauty. She sang while hauling the heavy water bucket back home. Lustful men and boys gazed in the direction of this seemingly unattainable, musically-voiced beauty whose fame had spread far and wide. None in the village dared propose for she seemed beyond reach.

...

"Aunt Rdo mtsho, time for breakfast. Father's waiting for you inside," called Dbang rgyal, interrupting her recollections. Her smile faded.



She wanted to permanently remain in that vanished past, but her stomach was grumbling and pushed her to get up and eagerly go inside for breakfast.

"This food is really delicious. I've not had food like this in years. Your brother never gave me such tasty food while I was at his home," Rdo mtsho said unselfconsciously, which made Skal bzang and his family uncomfortable for it was the sort of food that they ate daily. Rdo mtsho continued to praise the food as though she had been starved for a long time.

Rdo mtsho stayed at Skal bzang's house for more than two weeks. The family respected and treated her as their mother. Rdo mtsho was satisfied and decided to live with her brother until her last day, but she did not know how to tell him this.

"You all are kind, nice people, while it seems my destiny is to be old and lonely," Rdo mtsho confided emotionally to Skal bzang, who was sitting on a stool, encased in a sheepskin robe, silently and morosely gazing into the distance. "You're so lucky to have children around. You could never feel lonely. They respect and understand how to treat elders," Rdo mtsho said.

"Yes, especially when you're here," added Skal bzang.

"I feel much happier living with you here than with your younger brother. I'll stay longer if you don't mind," Rdo mtsho announced.

"You're more than welcome," Skal bzang replied.

"Really?" Rdo mtsho said.

"Yes, if you wish. When will you move in?" Skal bzang asked.

"I don't know. Soon, if it's OK," came the reply.

"Move whenever you like," Skal bzang offered seemingly generously.

"I never want to see that bastard's face again," Rdo mtsho blurted out angrily. "All my belongings must be brought here. Will you help me?"

Skal bzang nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

The following morning, Skal bzang saddled his brown mule and set out for the mountain where Rdo mtsho had lived. It was a long journey along a snaking path up to the village. He rode the mule



and then occasionally dismounted and rested. Sometimes he walked, leading the mule, wondering if Rgyal mtshan would return Rdo mtsho's belongings since she had stayed at his home for some years. While deep in thought, he was surprised to find himself suddenly at Rgyal mtshan's courtyard gate.

"My brother, how have you been?" asked Rgyal mtshan, who happened to be standing at the gate.

"Not bad," Skal bzang answered.

"Nice to have you here!" declared Rgyal mtshan.

"How about you? How is your hearing?" enquired Skal bzang.

"Worse than before," Rgyal mtshan responded.

"Time marches on," Skal bzang said with a slight, forced smile.

"Yes, we are old, useless, and powerless," answered Rgyal mtshan.

That night the two brothers made their bed in a private room, recalled their childhood, and sometimes laughed for so long it seemed their intestines might rupture. Occasionally, the room turned deadly quiet, only for the conversation to then resume.

Rgyal mtshan puffed on a pipe packed with smoldering, locally grown tobacco, smoke spiraling around the dim light from a rapeseed-oil lamp. Skal bzang lay by the window, staring at the ceiling. He wondered how he could broach the purpose of his visit. "I came for Sister's belongings. She wants to stay at my home," said Skal bzang finally.

Rgyal mtshan reluctantly agreed.

"What happened? I don't understand," asked Skal bzang.

"I forgot breakfast just one morning. I know she has spread the story that I didn't give her good breakfasts," Rgyal mtshan continued disappointedly.

"But I know she wouldn't exaggerate," replied Skal bzang.

"She does. She's always been like that. She behaved badly here every day," continued Rgyal mtshan. "You should be careful because I believe she'll do the same in your home."

"I'll be careful," assured Skal bzang.



Their conversation gradually petered out and the house became tranquil until Rgyal mtshan began snoring at a volume and intensity that truly resembled the sounds of a slumbering hog. Skal bzang stared at the lamp for a while and then, tired, blew it out.

The next morning, Rgyal mtshan helped his older brother load Rdo mtsho's possessions, which amounted to only half of what Skal bzang expected. Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law had argued that as she had cared for Rdo mtsho during her stay at Rgyal mtshan's home she deserved half of what Rdo mtsho owned.

Skal bzang got home around noon. Sweat drenched his shirt collar. Dbang rgyal, Skal bzang's son, was waiting at the gate and helped unload the horse. Rdo mtsho, noticing that he had returned, approached and inspected her belongings carefully. "You didn't bring everything. He refused to return them all, right?" Rdo mtsho inquired angrily.

Skal bzang nodded.

"He should have given everything back since Aunt is staying here," Dbang rgyal said.

"I know, but he'll visit soon. We'll talk about it then," Skal bzang said.

This response did not convince Dbang rgyal, but he dared say no more.

Soon they had lunch and, though some dissatisfaction hung in the air, it was a pleasant meal. After, Rdo mtsho went out to sit in a homemade chair and enjoy the sunshine in the courtyard. The radiant sun carpeted the earth with golden beams gifting everything with welcome warmth, easing the sorrow Rdo mtsho's fate had dealt her. Longing to return to the time when she was loved and pursued, she wondered how different her life might have been if her first marriage had been successful.

...

It had been another beautiful morning. Rdo mtsho went to fetch water as usual. Humming as she walked back home with the brimming bucket on her back, she saw a cluster of children playing in her courtyard, near some well-decorated horses tied to a pole.



Rdo mtsho reached the threshold, saw unfamiliar faces, and guessed that they were matchmakers. With contradictory thoughts, she greeted them politely and resumed her chores. She was right. The meeting between the strangers and her parents was about her future marriage. Her parents were given porcelain bowls and strips of silk. After the guests left, Rdo mtsho's parents told her that she would marry and move to her husband's home in a neighboring village. Rdo mtsho wished that her parents had rejected the proposal, but she knew that powerful forces were at work and she could only accept.

A month later, villagers gathered at Rdo mtsho's home to escort her on horseback to the groom's home. Rdo mtsho was the center of attention. She was like a princess.

The marriage began well. She and Rin chen enjoyed chatting and lived harmoniously but, as time passed, they quarreled and it became increasingly clear that Rdo mtsho no longer wanted to live with her new husband.

"You were the princess of your village. If you don't want to stay here, leave and find another man," Rin chen said.

"It's my fate to marry you but, if you don't want me, I'll leave," Rdo mtsho replied, salty tears rolling endlessly down her cheeks.

"Get out! I've had enough of your complaints!" Rin chen bellowed, grabbing a hot poker lying by the hearth and rushing at Rdo mtsho, who ran out of the house like a frightened hare chased by a voracious wolf. Rdo mtsho tumbled into a ditch, the worst accident of her life. When she regained consciousness, she was lying in the home of her parents, who treated her with unprecedented kindness. A few days later, she miscarried after which she stayed in bed for two weeks.

Time passed and matchmakers again came, bringing bolts of silk, valuable ancient tea bowls, tea bricks, and other gifts as though she were a powerful governor. Certain matchmakers represented well-off local people, including relatives of the local tribal leader, owners of hundreds of head of livestock, and wealthy businessmen. Pressured by her parents, Rdo mtsho married again.

Her subsequent marriages - seven in total - were unsuccessful. She stayed no more than two years in any one home. She got along



with her husbands and in-laws but was unable to conceive, which led to dissatisfaction and then separation. When matchmakers stopped visiting, she realized that she was in her forties and her youth was gone.

...

"Hello, Brother," Rgyal mtshan called out, appearing in Skal bzang's courtyard one cold windy morning with his thirty-year-old daughter-in-law.

"You really are an early bird. Come in, it's freezing out there," Skal bzang replied, inviting them into the house.

They all sat around the hearth. Rdo mtsho was still in bed, near the hearth. Detecting Rgyal mtshan's arrival, she turned silently to one side. Rgyal mtshan and Skal bzang found many topics to discuss before inevitably turning to Rdo mtsho. "She was at my home for several years. That's why I returned only half of her belongings," Rgyal mtshan started politely.

"But you promised you would take good care of her, and therefore we agreed to give you all her belongings," Skal bzang said.

Rgyal mtshan remained silent, as though agreeing. The conversation was at an impasse. Neither party knew what to say next. Then Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law blurted, "My family deserves half of her belongings because we cared for her very well during that time."

"Foolish girl! Shut up! Don't interrupt while elders are talking," Rgyal mtshan shouted.

"It's true. We won't return anything more!" Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law persisted.

"Show respect, girl. You shouldn't talk like that," insisted Dbang rgyal.

"Like what? Do you think I'm wrong? OK, tell me what we should do," demanded the daughter-in-law.

"Watch your tongue or I'll smack you!" Dbang rgyal bellowed, standing up.

"I dare you! Go ahead! Be a real man!" Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law shrieked.



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Dbang rgyal furiously rushed at her, rolling up his robe sleeves, making the erstwhile cozy room full of relatives as noisy as a magpie's nest.

When their attention eventually turned to Rdo mtsho, she had vanished and was now on another journey, this one to her niece's home. She felt an unprecedented energy surging inside her as if she was in her twenties again and was very sure of her final destination. She gradually disappeared into the distance, lost to view if anyone had been watching, her figure growing ever more indistinct in a snowy, frigid landscape of bleak, denuded mountains.



THE FUGITIVE<sup>1</sup>

Rdo rje don grub རོད་རྗེ་དོན་གུབ།

I created this story based on accounts I heard from different local people and my imagination.

...

**D**on't come near me. I've got a knife. I'll stab you in the heart if you take another step," Bkra shis murmured interminably. He could not wake up, as though possessed by wrathful spirits. Twisting from side to side on the *he rdze*, he kicked hard, disturbing his wife's sleep.

Mtsho mo looked at her husband anxiously and sighed. Finally, she patted his shoulder and gently said, "You're dreaming about *that* again."

Bkra shis woke up, soaked in sweat and disoriented. He sat up and wiped his forehead, looking as though he had been working in a mine for several hours without resting and drinking. He glanced at Mtsho mo and said nothing. Reluctantly, he gazed fixedly at the window, overcome by years of living in constant fear of being arrested.

...

The fifteen-day New Year period was approaching. It was cold enough to make your bones ache. Every household was occupied with New Year preparations, with most purchasing food and other items for the coming festival. However, Bkra shis's family and some other villagers were too poor to buy new things.

At this time Bkra shis began visiting some of his relatives frequently. Nyi ma, their eight-year-old son, rarely saw him after dinner. He asked Mtsho mo once where his father was, but she remained silent.

<sup>1</sup> Rka phug Rdo rje don grub. 2014. The Fugitive in Farmers, Fugitives, Ghosts, and Exploding Grasshoppers: Everyday Life in Horse Race Village, a Tibetan Community on the Yellow River. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 33:156-195.



Several days passed. Sometimes Bkra shis only returned at the crack of dawn and then slept during the day. Once he entered the house, he collapsed on his bed, too weary to remove his clothes. Seeing his strained face, Nyi ma wondered again what he had been doing all night. "Why do you come home so late? What do you do at night, Father?" Nyi ma asked.

He answered, "Child, don't interfere in adult affairs."

His answers so dismayed Nyi ma that he didn't know how to respond and walked away, his head bowed in heavy disappointment. Though Nyi ma did not understand, he knew something was terribly wrong.

#### THEFT

Early one morning, Bkra shis returned home hurriedly with a sallow face and threw his arms around himself as if he were freezing. He then stretched his hands out to the fire and rubbed them together. After a while, he took his pipe unsteadily from his pocket, packed the bowl with potent local tobacco, lit it, and puffed several times, staring at the fire, lost in thought.

Mtsho mo was an early bird and was sweeping the floor when Bkra shis arrived. She quickly added dung to the fire. Bkra shis was agitated and did not know what to say. As Mtsho mo leaned forward, adding wood to the cooking stove, she squatted. Noticing Bkra shis' palsied fingers wrapped around his pipe, she asked, "What happened to your hands?"

"Uh... Nothing, actually," replied Bkra shis, trying unsuccessfully to stop his hands from shaking.

"You are uncomfortable. What happened?" Mtsho mo asked again.

Bkra shis didn't know where to start, hesitated and then moved nearer Mtsho mo. He was about to say something when Nyi ma emerged from under a quilt on the bed, eager to hear. Bkra shis noticed and said, "Nyi ma, please go out for a bit, I have something to tell your mother."



Nyi ma obeyed, and then squatted just outside the door, eavesdropping.

"Listen, something terrible happened last night. Terrible!" Bkra shis began in a tremulous, worried tone.

"What?" Mtsho mo asked, urging him to continue.

Bkra shis took a deep breath and proceeded, "I told you what we've been doing these days. Last night, my friends and I took pieces of metal from the factory located near our fields. We should have been satisfied but, when we were about to return, we saw some other metal we hadn't noticed before. Nobody wanted to lose what seemed a good opportunity. We all agreed to grab some, but the problem was the guards."

Mtsho mo knotted her eyebrows, giving total attention to Bkra shis, who continued, "Ye shes and I were responsible for watching the guards. No lights were on when we scrambled up a hill for a broader view. Other friends jumped over the walls and reached the court piled with the pieces of metal that are worth a lot. When they were about to haul the heaviest ones over the wall, there was an accident. One of our men slipped and fell into the courtyard. The metal fell with a thunderous clang and the guards rushed over like angry ants."

Bkra shis stood, pacing back and forth as he talked. Excitement gripped his face, as he further lost himself in describing what had transpired. "I whistled a signal to retreat, but we had to rescue our man who had fallen into the courtyard. My friends tried to pull him back up as the guards, armed with stones, approached and yelled. I ran down and told my companions to run. As we were about to retreat, three guards appeared from their room holding weapons. Three of my friends pounced on them like furious wolves. The guards fell back as they were punched and beaten. One guard's head was smashed with a brick, and blood flowed from a wound. As soon as I told them to flee, they abandoned the guard. When I climbed up the wall and was about to jump down, I realized it was too dangerous. I warned the other men, who changed direction. As I turned, intent on following my friends, someone grabbed me from behind. We fell and his back hit the ground with me on top. Though he was hurt, he didn't let go. As I struggled to get free, I realized that he was clutching my



sheepskin coat. I squirmed out of it and fled. As soon as I got over the wall, furious guards shot at me. Ye shes was running toward me, dragging one leg. He had been struggling with a guard, whose gun had accidentally fired, the bullet passing through his right thigh. We got home as quickly as we could."

Speechless, Mtsho mo stared into the fire for some moments, before saying, "It's not your fault. If we weren't so poor, you wouldn't need to steal." She added more wood to the fire, looked at Bkra shis, and knew something was missing. "Where's your sheepskin coat?" she asked.

Stunned, Bkra shis frantically began searching the house, but it was nowhere to be found. He was fretful and could not recall where he had left it.

"Think carefully. It's evidence. If it's still at the place you just described, they'll find you," cautioned Mtsho mo.

"I can't remember," Bkra shis replied.

"I didn't see your coat when you arrived. You must have left it somewhere," urged Mtsho mo.

Bkra shis thought. He could not remember. Then after a few minutes, he recalled, "Yes! I left it there."

"Where?" asked Mtsho mo anxiously.

"Where we fought with the guards," Bkra shis answered.

"That's bad, bad. You said your plans were secret and well-rehearsed, but you left your coat there," Mtsho mo said furiously. "They'll use your coat to identify you and then the police will arrest and imprison you."

Bkra shis fell silent, never imagining his coat would bring such trouble. Regretting all he had done, he bowed his head, running his hands through his thinning hair.

Sighing deeply Mtsho mo cautioned, "We must be very careful. They'll arrive at any time. Our village is very near the factory. We are all suspects now."

"Yes, we must be very careful. I'll inform the others, too," Bkra shis replied anxiously.

"What if they arrest you, or all of us? We'll all be punished," despaired Mtsho mo, tears glinting.



"They'll not arrest any of us. The Three Jewels<sup>1</sup> will protect us. Don't worry," reassured Bkra shis, though he had no idea what the next day would bring. He stopped talking, stepped out to the threshold and, noticing Nyi ma, said, "Go wash your face, Son. We'll go buy candy for Tibetan New Year. I'll be back soon," and then he disappeared.

The sun began shining brightly but generated little warmth. Several heavily-clothed policemen approached the village in the distance, tracking footprints left by Bkra shis and his fellows that led to a home adjacent to the factory. The policemen divided into two groups and entered the home, impudently shoving open the door.

Another policeman holding a hat stepped through another courtyard gate and found a housewife busy with chores in the courtyard. He politely asked her, "Do you recognize this hat? Who wears this hat in your village?"

As soon as Lhun 'grub, the household head, heard the policeman, he stepped outside and approached the group, feeling fretful and uneasy. Recognizing one policeman, he felt better, called him over, and said, "I'm telling you this because we're relatives. You must swear that you won't share this information with the government or the other policemen. You must keep it secret."

"I promise," the policeman answered solemnly.

"I heard my maternal uncle and some other village men have been stealing metal from the factory. I think that's my uncle's hat," confided Lhun 'grub.

The policeman mingled with two other policemen and then they left without a word. The other group of policemen knocked violently at the door of another home until someone scurried to open it. "Do any of you recognize this sheepskin coat? Tell us what you know, or you'll be in serious trouble," a middle-aged policeman threatened bossily.

"It belongs to Bkra shis," confessed the petrified householder. The policemen then rushed in the direction of the village threshing ground, signaling to the policemen lagging there to catch up. Bkra

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<sup>1</sup> Dkon mchog gsum 'the Three Jewels' refers to the Buddha, the Buddha's teachings, and the community of monks.



shis returned from visiting his friend's home and had breakfast with his son and wife. Not a word was spoken, intensifying the strained atmosphere. After the quick breakfast, Mtsho mo and Nyi ma left, leaving Bkra shis alone inside the house. Mtsho mo locked the door to thwart the policemen, should they come.

Mtsho mo and Nyi ma approached the threshing ground where villagers were huddled. It seemed a meeting was in progress. Seeing two jeeps parked on the threshing ground center sent a shiver of fear through Mtsho mo. She clutched Nyi ma's hand and began retreating home.

"Where is Bkra shis's home?" a policeman questioned an old man in a village lane. The old man was Nyi ma's grandfather.

"He's my daughter's husband. If you have something important to tell him, you can discuss it with me," the old man said.

"We have business with him and prefer to talk to him in person," a policeman replied authoritatively, as though he were the captain.

As soon as they reached Bkra shis's home, they gripped their weapons and scurried around the home without making much noise. Finding the door locked they retreated in disappointment. Bkra shis was terrified by the sounds outside but kept quiet. Mtsho mo and Nyi ma returned after the policemen had walked back to the threshing ground.

"You must avoid the policemen in our village. They know the missing coat is yours. You're under suspicion," Mtsho mo said, panting anxiously.

"Who told the police the coat belongs to me? My friends? A villager?" Bkra shis wondered. Considering the implications, fear rose inside him. "I must be very careful," he thought to himself.

Bkra shis furtively left the village that afternoon and climbed a nearby tall mountain, in case the policemen returned, only coming home at dusk.



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SURRENDER?

"I talked to the police captain at the threshing ground today. They'll punish you lightly if you surrender. He suggests the sooner the better or they'll imprison you all for many years," counseled Nyi ma's grandfather, disturbing the quiet in the house.

"They're cunning. There's no possibility they'll reduce our punishment. They'll beat us to death after they get us," declared Dbang phyug.

"You can't be stubborn. You are all heroes and I'm proud of each of you, but the best way to solve this is to surrender. They'll relentlessly pursue you until all of you are imprisoned one by one. I don't want to see that," urged Nyi ma's grandfather.

"But we could flee and return when things are calmer. We can flee today, tonight, now," suggested Bkra shis spiritedly.

"Yes. I smashed one man's head with a brick. I heard he was sent to the hospital. I don't want to get my head smashed when he sees me," Rdo kho said.

"But they shot one of you. It's even now," declared Nyi ma's grandfather.

Though Nyi ma's grandfather believed surrendering and confessing would bring reduced punishment, the seven younger men could never seriously consider relinquishing their freedom willingly.

"Don't panic. I'll have a confidential meeting with the policeman who is my relative. Let's decide what to do after I meet him," suggested Bkra b+ha, who had remained silent while others were talking.

"Is he trustworthy? How close is he to you? People will do anything if they are bribed and offered a promotion. He's not a captain. There's a big possibility he'll betray us. You must be very careful and not put us all at risk," cautioned Sha rdo.

"He's my close relative. You all must have faith in me," urged Bkra b+ha.

Midnight came. Bkra b+ha, the oldest among the suspects, was determined to visit his policeman relative.



Dpal ldan, an ambitious young policeman who wore western-style clothes at home, paced back and forth in his living room, smoking. He thought, "What should I tell my uncle?" Extinguishing his cigarette in an ashtray, wisps of smoke gently wafted into the air. Revealing the truth to the police captain would mean his uncle would be imprisoned for at least several years. On the other hand, revealing what he had discovered from a visit to another village home the previous day would give him status, wealth, and power - the life he had dreamed of since becoming a policeman. He had never encountered such tantalizing, complex, and ruthless choices. Suddenly, an unusually loud knock interrupted his ruminations.

"Uncle, whatever your group decides, you must let me know first. I'll try my best to find a solution," Dpal ldan coaxed, after inviting Bkra b+ha inside.

"Can you really find a solution? You're young. It's not that I don't trust you, but I'm afraid your captain won't do what he promises. I imagine they will detain us as soon as you reveal what you know," Bkra b+ha said.

Trying to reassure his uncle Dpal ldan suggested he'd discuss it with the captain the next morning and inform his uncle immediately if there was a further development.

Looking at Dpal ldan's impassive expression, Bkra b+ha left without another word.

Early the next morning, every villager was summoned to the threshing ground for an urgent meeting. When Mtsho mo and Nyi ma arrived, several police cars were already parked there and about a dozen policemen were surrounded by villagers. One then announced, "We've discovered the men who've committed the crimes in your village. It's not wise to deceive the government. We're not idiots. We've given you enough time to consider and confess what you've done. Don't blame us for taking action if you resist."

The frightened villagers then began murmuring. The police captain strode toward Bkra b+ha, who was wearing a brand-new hat. Bkra b+ha stood still as a monument, showing no expression.

"So, you're Bkra b+ha. I've heard about you. May I see your new hat?" asked the captain sarcastically.



Bkra b+ha handed it to him, not taking his gaze from the captain's face. "Nice hat," the captain said, and then he turned and waved, signaling the other policemen to retreat. The cars soon vanished into the distance down the dusty lane, in a trail of noise.

The murmuring continued as the villagers trudged home. Bkra b+ha and his friends lagged behind, helplessness showing in their impassive expressions.

That night Bkra shis and his friends met. Few words were spoken. Everyone just waited, waited, waited. After the nearly silent meeting, only "Be careful!" was said, before they returned to their homes.

#### POLICE RAID

Mtsho mo was preparing dumplings for supper. She skillfully wrapped the stuffing in the wrappers, while Bkra shis kneaded dough until it became pliant. While Nyi ma was imagining the tasty, cooked dumplings, Mtsho mo asked him to add firewood to the stove to boil water. The bird-like, uncooked dumplings were lined up on plates as though they were hatching. Nyi ma stared like a cat at them as they danced in the steaming cauldron. He was delighted as supper time drew nearer anticipating them steaming in his bowl. He sat by the fire anxiously waiting for his bowl to be filled, the air redolent with the fragrance of dumplings.

Nyi ma soon took a bowl of steaming dumplings from Mtsho mo, picked up one with a pair of chopsticks, and began eating it like a famished wolf. Bkra shis looked at Nyi ma, smiled, and said, "Eat slowly. There're plenty more dumplings in the pot." Nyi ma flushed and continued attacking the dumplings.

When Mtsho mo walked to the kitchen to get seasonings, she heard the squealing brakes of cars stopping nearby. Striding outside she was faced with a barricade. Several policemen rushed to Mtsho mo's neighbor's courtyard gate while others were talking to villagers. Seeing this, Mtsho mo rushed back inside panting. "Hide! They're here!" she stammered.



Bkra shis stopped eating and disappeared into one of the storerooms desperately seeking shelter, like a mouse escaping a cat. He crawled into a half-emptied flour container.

When Mtsho mo again stepped outside the door, she saw seven men scurrying about in two groups. Armed with pistols and truncheons, they first circled the house, and then rushed inside. They searched every room in pairs, shouting loudly. Failing to find Bkra shis, they gathered in the main room and noticed the bowls filled with dumplings. "Where's your husband?" a policeman asked in a hoarse voice, as though he had been smoking for years.

"I don't know," answered Mtsho mo defiantly.

"You're very loyal. You should also be loyal to your government," a tall man said knowingly. "Your husband committed a crime and you should tell us his whereabouts and then he'll be sentenced lightly. Otherwise, all of you are in trouble."

Mtsho mo maintained a sincere look of innocence and kept her mouth shut. After a while, a man squatted by Nyi ma, stroked his head gently, and asked, "Where did your father go, little friend?"

Though Nyi ma knew where he was, he detested these awful men and loved his father. After fruitless effort, the men left frustrated, and Mtsho mo calmed down. She and Nyi ma rushed to the storeroom, opened the flour container, and Bkra shis emerged, flour coating his clothes as though he has been caught in a blizzard. Seeing Bkra shis's appearance, Nyi ma giggled. Mtsho mo stayed calm, signaled that the police had left, and said not a word as she packed butter, *rtsam pa*, and some meat in a bag.

Bkra shis sat quietly by the hearth, puffing his pipe. He gave some thought to surrendering, but remembering his family, he knew he could not. He thought, "This ordeal is destined for this lifetime. I must confront and overcome it."

Mtsho mo approached, sat by him, looked at him despondently, and said, "You are entangled in this and we must face it. This is destined. There's nothing we can do to change it. You must avoid arrest. I can't take responsibility for this family alone. I have often been ill after giving birth to Nyi ma and I am now pregnant



again. Go somewhere. Elude them. It's the only way." Mtsho mo's tears flowed, as though her red eye sockets were springs.

"I've tried my best to improve our poor condition. Instead, I've brought disaster. I am deeply regretful," confessed Bkra shis in a trembling voice.

"What you did was for our family," Mtsho mo said. "I have prepared food and the mule is saddled. Set out at midnight."

"Yes, that's best. Those rapacious policemen will probably come again at the crack of dawn," Bkra shis replied, looking at the sky, checking the time.

Time passed. They squatted by the hearth, staring at the starry sky through the window. Nyi ma wanted to say something to his father but was at a loss for words.

#### ARREST

Bkra shis loaded the mule under the moonlight and then walked away, leading the mule by the light of the starry sky to a place Nyi ma had never been. He marched forward, looking back now and again at his wife and son. Mtsho mo's tears glittered like crystal diamonds. It was the first time Nyi ma had seen his mother so despondent.

The next morning as the sun's first rays glimmered, smoke from numerous village chimneys escaped gently into the air, announcing families were up and busy with chores. However, this idyllic scene was soon shattered by policemen swarming around Mtsho mo's home, searching every room again and behaving rudely. Their eyes glowed with irritation and hatred when they were unable to find Bkra shis. They crudely hustled Mtsho mo into a village lane. She felt disoriented but walked steadily. Devastated at Mtsho mo's departure, Nyi ma ran after her, and tightly grasped her hand, terrified she would be jailed. When he looked at Mtsho mo, he saw hatred in her eyes and not a trace of fear. Such bravery helped him find courage.

Bkra b+ha guessed Dpal ldan had betrayed him. His anger was so great that he would have tortured the betrayer thousands of times, but what awaited Bkra b+ha was imprisonment.



When Mtsho mo and Nyi ma approached a relative's home, they saw Bkra b+ha, surrounded by several men holding guns. On his shoulder, Bkra b+ha placidly carried the pieces of metal that he had stolen.

Bsod nams had also been apprehended. His wife and children stared at him, their faces wet with tears. Looking at their miserable faces, Nyi ma's heart felt broken. The policemen pushed Bsod nams forward and thrust his head down.

Other policemen stayed patiently behind. Suddenly, an impetuous young policeman rushed at Mtsho mo and beat her with a stick. Provoked by such outrageousness, Mtsho mo scolded, "Audacious dog! If you are truly brave enough, find my husband! I committed no crime. How dare you treat people like this?"

These words momentarily silenced the policemen. Afterward, one approached and threatened, "We can't arrest your husband because of you. You helped him escape. Tell us everything now, or you will be in serious trouble."

Mtsho mo fearlessly replied, "Be careful! I'm innocent. If you continue to mistreat me, I have the right to bring charges against you all."

Mtsho mo's threat changed nothing but when the policemen noticed more villagers gathering, they silently backed away, talked among themselves, and then departed. Nyi ma felt great relief. Mtsho mo gazed at them and murmured under her breath. Nyi ma was dumbstruck by her reaction in front of her tormentors and silently prayed that nothing serious would happen to his relatives and Bkra shis's friends.

All the suspects except Bkra shis and Ye shes were hustled off to jail. The village became quieter after Bkra shis's friends were gone. The frequent visiting, laughing, and jovial atmosphere were gone.

Wrinkles accumulated on Mtsho mo's forehead and her hair grayed as the years passed. Though misfortune plagued her, she never surrendered, bravely bearing the heavy burden of caring for her family, stoically confronting every difficulty.

Ye shes hid in the mountains and met Bkra shis. They wandered in the mountains and forests, avoiding people for fear they



would divulge their whereabouts to earn a reward from the local government. Sometimes, they visited relatives for a brief time and then their wives would come with meat and bread for them.

#### YE SHES'S ARREST

Several years passed during which time most of the convicted thieves were released. Meanwhile, no longer able to bear the harsh weather, Bkra shis and Ye shes furtively moved to Ye shes's home in an agro-pastoral area where many of the local families were Ye shes's relatives cultivating barley, potatoes, and beans. They visited other local families openly as though they had regained their freedom. Everything was quiet for a couple of weeks.

Then, one night, Ye shes bravely said, "New Year is approaching. The local leader and his men also need to be at home at this time. Our friends have also been released from prison."

"Maybe, but sometimes the police make special investigations, especially before the New Year," cautioned Bkra shis.

"I think it will be fine. I'll go to town tomorrow morning and buy some things for the New Year," announced Ye shes.

Bkra shis stopped puffing on his pipe, wrapped it in his tobacco pouch, and exclaimed, "Are you serious?"

"Just this once. They won't recognize me if I'm in town driving a tractor," insisted Ye shes resolutely.

"It's dangerous. They've got our pictures. They'll recognize you," replied Bkra shis. "What if they arrest you? What if they are waiting for us there?"

Ye shes silently put his head on his pillow and pulled his quilt around him. Bkra shis blew out the rapeseed-oil lamp. The night seemed particularly tranquil.

A rooster crowed, announcing a new day. Bkra shis remained in bed. He had tossed and turned, thinking of Ye shes's planned trip to town. He finally fell asleep and did not awaken until the bright sunshine fell on his bed. Ye shes was gone. Bkra shis hurriedly wrapped up in his robe and strode into the kitchen wearing a severe



expression. "Where is your husband, Sha bo?" Bkra shis asked, tightening his sash.

"He went to town this morning to buy things for New Year. He said he would be back soon. He asked me to tell you not to worry," Sha bo said.

But Bkra shis did worry, thinking about Ye shes's safety. Eventually, he stepped up on the *he rdze*, sat cross-legged, held a wood-cover Tibetan scripture volume, and commenced reciting scriptures while swaying his upper body.

The town was about twenty kilometers from Ye shes's home. Ye shes drove his tractor along the road, imagining the tractor was an airplane. Everything seemed usual when he reached the small town. The single long street was packed with locals clad in sheepskin robes. He pulled the tractor to the side of the street and entered a shop. He noticed the local leader's office in the distance and dared not approach it. After making purchases, he felt jubilant and worry-free, mounted his tractor, and sped homeward, joyfully humming, imagining spending the coming festive days with his relatives and family. He was so enraptured by his sense of bravery and accomplishment in coming to the local town and eager with anticipation for the coming New year period that he never thought to look back. Shortly after, a siren echoed piercingly, rushing toward him. Ye shes was startled and tried to accelerate, but the tractor could go no faster. Thick rings of pitch-black smoke spewed into the air.

From behind, the leader's men shouted at him to stop. With no alternative, Ye shes stopped the tractor and stuck his hands in the air. Immediately, two men rushed forward, threw him to the ground, and handcuffed his hands behind his back.

"Be co-operative!" demanded a policeman arrogantly, and shoved him into the jeep. Another policeman chugged off on the tractor, driving it back to town. The normally loquacious Ye shes had grown quiet, bowed his head, and was now full of regret for ignoring his friend's warning.

Back home Bkra shis and Sha bo watched outside until darkness fell. Bkra shis had an uneasy premonition of impending disaster. They finally went inside and sat around the hearth, staring



at the burning firewood. They did not have dinner in the house that was now ominously quiet, except for the sizzling sound from the hearth. Bkra shis pulled out his pipe from his pouch, lit it, and began puffing.

"Sha bo, please saddle my mule," Bkra shis said politely. He emptied his pipe, tapping it against the sole of his shoe.

"Why? Are you leaving?" asked Sha bo.

"Yes, your home is no longer safe," replied Bkra shis, packing a leather bag.

"But my husband isn't back yet. Aren't you going to wait for him?" she pleaded.

"I must go," insisted Bkra shis.

Sha bo lowered her head and the house again fell silent.

"What's wrong?" Bkra shis asked.

"Nothing," she replied, her eyes glittering with crystal tears. "You must have heard something about Ye shes. Tell me what you know."

"I didn't hear anything. Don't think too much. Your husband will be fine," consoled Bkra shis. A few minutes later he took the mule's reins and trudged into the darkness, thinking of his wife after witnessing Sha bo's endless tears.

The next day, news of Ye shes's arrest spread like the wind. "What sins did he commit in his previous life?" an old man said. "*oM ma Ni pad+me hUM*. May the Three Jewels protect and bless him."

"What unfortunate karma! Why is life so unfair? Why must women always suffer for the misdeeds of their men?" lamented an old lady and resumed chanting.

As villagers went to bed that night, the whole village seemed to regain its usual tranquility. Then suddenly half a dozen men wearing ordinary clothes jumped over Ye shes's home compound walls, searching for Bkra shis who luckily, had fled long before. Having no success, they soon left, glaring hatefully at Sha bo.

Maybe it was Bkra shis's fate to escape, or his destiny to live in the clutches of hatred and fear. He was an ordinary person, who, in an attempt to improve his family's life, committed a crime.



## FUTURE

Several months after Bkra shis had left home, Mtsho mo gave birth to a lovely daughter, Klu mo, who brought great joy. However, Mtsho mo's burden was now heavier.

One night, Mtsho mo's relatives gathered and discussed her future. "As your father, I can't bear for you to die before I do. There is a saying, 'It's a disgrace for white-haired people to see off black-haired people.' Your husband can't come home and you have two children. Your son can now care for this family," Nyi ma's grandfather, Pa sangs, said.

"You mean Nyi ma should stay at home and help me?" Mtsho mo asked.

"Yes. Women suffer most. You should listen to your father's suggestions," Bzang mo, Pa sangs's wife, added.

"He's doing very well at school. He's the top student in his class. Every teacher praises his progress. Dropping out will ruin his future prospects," protested Mtsho mo.

"That's fate. The same happened to me. I left school because I am the oldest son in my family. You are my sister. You know that," Nyi ma's uncle, Tshe b+ho, said.

Mtsho mo continued, "I know. Though our family lineage is considered impeccable, none of us have a better life. We work in the fields until death comes. I don't want my children to suffer like us. I hope they change their lives through education. That's my wish in this life."

"My dear daughter, you are correct. Long ago, a famous Tibetan saint said, 'Even if you know your life will end tomorrow, study today.' I understand the importance of knowledge," Pa sangs advised.

Mtsho mo gently stroked Nyi ma's and his sister's heads. The visitors appeared to have acquiesced to Mtsho mo's decision and left without a word a bit later.

Nyi ma could not imagine how hard his life would be if he quit school. He knew how much he would miss the days with his schoolmates.



Lo sar drew closer. Villagers were busy shopping. An invigorating spirit suffused the village, but Mtsho mo and her relatives were deeply depressed. The cheery atmosphere of New Year had died out in their souls.

#### WITH GRANDPARENTS

Many months passed and then Bkra shis surreptitiously returned home one dawn. Nyi ma thought he had regained his freedom and no longer needed to hide. Nyi ma was ecstatic with his return but was soon disillusioned when he saw his parents packing some bags. It seemed they planned to leave.

At that time, Lha sa was considered very far from Bkra shis's home. He had heard that some neighboring villagers had escaped to Lha sa after they had gone against the local government. Consequently, Lha sa had become an attractive refuge. However, he did not reveal where he was going to his children because he thought it would be risky if the police interrogated them and learned the truth.

After a usual supper, Bkra shis spoke, "As you two understand, I can't be with you for a while. I need to go somewhere. Your mother will also come."

"Will you and Mother be back soon?" Nyi ma asked.

Klu mo stared at their parents, seemingly wanting to say something, but only mumbled incoherently the way very young children do.

"Yes, soon. Please remember, your father is not a bad man. He loves you. I made mistakes, but everything will be all right. Don't worry. Understand?" explained Bkra shis.

"You'll stay with your grandparents while we're gone. Don't be naughty. Obey them. Study hard. Sometimes they'll scold you, but they love you, too. Never talk back. Do you understand?" added Mtsho mo.

"We're really sorry to leave you with your grandparents. We'll make it up to you when we return. Nyi ma, please take care of your



sister. I want to see you two go to school and graduate from universities," Bkra shis said.

These words were thus engraved on the two little children's hearts, never to be erased. The next day they had a new home - their grandparents' home. Despite their parents' promises, years passed before they saw each other again. Nevertheless, the children were optimistic about their future, because they kept their parents' words and promises in their hearts, empowering them to overcome whatever obstacles presented themselves.

#### NEW LIFE IN LHA SA

Bkra shis contacted his social ties in and beyond Lha sa, seeking work. After living a hard life precariously in holy Lha sa for several years, he sold his one-year-old tractor to get enough money to treat relevant officers with expensive food in restaurants and offer them other inducements, finally obtaining an official driver's license. He then worked as a cab driver for a taxi company, earning about 2,000 RMB monthly. Though he was far from his home village, in his dreams police regularly chased him. He slept fitfully, often waking drenched in sweat. When he was unable to cope with such dreams, he visited monasteries and prayed for mental tranquility. He and Mtsho mo offered *bsang* and circumambulated monasteries hoping to gain inner peace. As time went by, this mental anguish lessened, but he still wondered how they would maintain their life in what remained an unfamiliar city.

Lha sa is a popular tourist destination. Thousands pour into the city, especially in summer. Bkra shis's earnings multiplied. Three years later, his savings allowed him to open a small shop that Mtsho mo managed near the Jo khang. Mtsho mo's outgoing nature attracted many customers, and she began making more friends in the city, including locals and people originally from her home area. With their kind assistance, coupled with her diligence and perseverance, her small business did well and their life markedly improved.

However, when Mtsho mo thought of her two children entrusted to her parents, she felt terrible. Tears trickled down her



face. Sometimes, she wept surreptitiously in fear Bkra shis would scold her, using her tears as evidence of feminine weakness. Mtsho mo eventually could no longer suppress her emotions and exploded one night, "Bkra shis, I can't bear missing my children! I must visit home this summer!"

Bkra shis remained silent as if he had not heard. Mtsho mo waited patiently until Bkra shis broke the long silence. He gently turned from Mtsho mo, moved to the other side of the bed, turned on the light and lit a cigarette with a lighter decorated with the Tibetan alphabet. Puffs of smoke drifted languidly in the air. He stared as if drugged by the smoke's taste and odor, which reminded him of the taste of tobacco he had grown in his small tobacco plot back at home.

"Absolutely! We often promised to visit. Surely, we've broken our vows. What shame!" exclaimed Bkra shis.

"So, you approve of me visiting home?" Mtsho mo asked hopefully.

"It's more than just needing to visit. We should return. We belong there, but it's still not the right time," Bkra shis said.

In the dim light, Mtsho mo's crystal tears glistened. She was speechless and choked with emotion. "When is the right time?" she finally sniffed.

"I don't know, but I believe the Three Jewels will provide the answer," Bkra shis replied, feeling drawn to a Buddha image hung on the wall.

Suddenly, Mtsho mo smiled broadly as if all her sorrows had been washed away. She wiped her teary eyes with her nightgown sleeve and said, "What about bringing them here for a summer holiday? They could visit monasteries to accumulate merit, broaden their mind, and they won't need to work during harvest time back home. It would be a very good chance for them to visit this holy land - a lifetime dream fulfilled for many."

"Excellent, but the universe has grown smaller since our youth. Lha sa is no longer the dreamland of years ago and will be much less so some years from now. We'll have more chances to bring them here. Let's wait another year. OK?" Bkra shis said.



Mtsho mo's enthusiasm evaporated as she wilted onto the bed without looking at her husband. Bkra shis took the last puff, flicked the remains of his cigarette into the ashtray, turned off the light, and lay down with a heavy feeling.

#### MTSHO MO'S VISIT HOME

Summer quietly approached, embracing the holy city in greenery. Birds chirped and flitted back and forth among tree branches, celebrating summer's arrival. Pilgrims dressed in Tibetan clothing rested in parks near the Po ta la under towering trees to avoid the powerful sunshine that had illuminated ancient Tibetan historical events and culture from time immemorial. Shimmering lights glittered from the gold decorated tops of the Po ta la, suffusing every corner of the holy city, magically protecting the city from harm. Mtsho mo leaned against a gigantic tree in the park in front of the Po ta la after circumambulating both the Po ta la and Jo khang that morning. She wanted a long rest. A pleasant breeze caressed her cheeks and her willow-like hair fluttered. Pilgrims chatted in various dialects that she only partially comprehended. She paid little attention, however, as she gazed at the towering Po ta la without blinking, eager to share a long-buried secret. She understood the Po ta la to be a receptacle of supreme religions mystery and value, and she hoped to have the good fortune to glimpse it when she took her last breath. After a long while, she put her hands to her wrinkled forehead piously, murmured, and shut her eyes.

A group of pilgrims speaking her home dialect passed by, murmuring the Po ta la's praises. The familiar dialect immediately attracted her attention. She opened her eyes but could only see their backs of a couple followed by two children. She estimated the children to be the same age as her own back in their home village with her parents. Plunged into mental anguish, she stood, despite her fatigue, grabbed her *bsang* pouch, donned her white broad-brimmed hat, and hurried home, eager to inform Bkra shis of something.

"Our children will have their summer holiday soon. If you think we are not ready to bring them here this year, please allow me



to visit this summer. It doesn't need to be a long visit," she pleaded, tears oozing from the corners of her eyes.

"You are desperate to see them. I'm committing a serious sin to disagree. I don't have much to say, if you've already made up your mind," Bkra shis said.

Mtsho mo smiled broadly, a smile Bkra shis had not seen for too long. It recalled aspects of her youthful beauty, for she had been much sought-after when she was in her early twenties. That beauty from the old days had evaporated like dew on a hot summer day, buried now somewhere in her bones rarely rising to the surface. Bkra shis gazed at her affectionately as if it was their first romantic rendezvous, realizing he had indeed made the right decision.

"I will entrust our shop to my good friend. There's no need for you to worry about it. She'll manage it well. Her Lha sa dialect is better than mine," reassured Mtsho mo the next day, putting her luggage atop the bus. "Be careful while driving. Many tourists are here, especially at this time. Drive slowly. We can't cope with an accident."

"I know! I know! I'm not a three-year-old child! I know how I should behave," Bkra shis said impatiently.

She boarded the bus, which soon chugged ahead, casting thick blasts of black smoke behind. Bkra shis stood still as Mtsho mo embarked on her homeward journey. Mtsho mo had not shed tears this time. Instead, she was resolute and ecstatic. Her soul had lifted. She waved to Bkra shis gracefully and, as the bus passed in front of the Po ta la, she gazed at it and prayed silently, as though saying farewell.

She drifted off to sleep an hour later as the bus moved down a well-paved road, surrounded by towering, various-shaped mountains that she understood to be manifestations of mountain deities in this holy realm. She closed her eyes in exhaustion, as though she had not slept for years.

Mtsho mo arrived home three nights and two days later. Meeting her parents and relatives brought pleasure. She felt vital and strong. Although Lha sa was considered a dreamland by most Tibetans, her birthplace also gave her great joy. She visited village



relatives in turn and chatted about her life in Lha sa. Everyone expressed great curiosity, admiration, and a desire to visit holy Lha sa in their lifetime. Mtsho mo explained the challenges in dealing with loneliness and lacking friends and relatives there.

Years of absence from the village meant there were many changes. The once bumpy, narrow path leading to the village had been widened and paved. Tractor numbers had doubled, disturbing village tranquility. The village electrical system had been revamped and villagers yearned for larger, more sophisticated televisions, and DVD players. Seeing such rapid development, Mtsho mo felt it important to return permanently and improve her home; she realized the gap between her family and other village families created by their absence, was rapidly widening.

Mtsho mo wept when visiting their deserted home. Weeds as tall as middle-aged men waved from the packed adobe roof, which leaked because of the holes insects had dug. Unpruned flowering trees in the courtyard towered over the walls. Poplar leaves were heaped in courtyard corners. Thick, dried mud had collected along passageways as if water had flowed inside when the torrential rain had fallen. Weeds as thick as grass on the mountain pastures pierced the courtyard walls. Mtsho mo squatted and stared at all of this for a long while, as though her eyes were playing tricks.

She then worked for five days cleaning the house, never feeling obligated to do so. Rather, she found pleasure in these tasks completing them with enthusiasm.

#### CAR ACCIDENT

Klu mo began school in her village and did well in her studies. Meanwhile, Nyi ma studied in junior middle school. He often visited home on the weekends to see his sister but sometimes, because of study pressure and the teachers' mistreatment, a fear of teachers was in his mind. He begged his grandparents to allow him to stay at home for some days, but they refused because they believed that education assured a better future.



Hearing of Mtsho mo's home visit, Nyi ma was eager to reach home as quickly as possible and be reunited with his mother. Mtsho mo, however, was concerned with his study and promised to visit his school one weekend. It was an ordinary day when Mtsho mo and Klu mo set out for the county town in a battered mini-bus they boarded near the village. Striking summer scenery appeared like a goddess of beauty, clad in various colored garments, intoxicating passengers, who forgot the discomforts of the journey along a winding road. Curious Klu mo never ceased questioning Mtsho mo from the beginning of the journey until she felt queasy and drifted into sleep as the bus reached the halfway point.

In time, passengers leaned against the sides of the bus as though they were drunkards. Snores were audible. Large drops of jiggling, translucent sweat dotted the driver's forehead as the sun reached its zenith. He wiped his forehead with a moist towel when sweat periodically trickled into his eyes. "Don't violate rules, just follow the road," the driver whispered to himself, looking into the distance at a four-door sedan, not having the heart to disturb his dreaming passengers. "Don't come down the center of the road," the driver whispered to himself as a Santana came ever nearer and then, just moments later he shrieked, "No! No! No!"

A powerful force knocked the mini-bus to one side of the road. It turned over twice. Parts of the bus were torn apart and hurtled into the distance. The Santana had smashed into the front of the mini-bus that now resembled a broken egg shrouded in dust, as it lay upside down, like an animal carcass after the flesh has been ripped away, its tilted wheels spinning pathetically in ever slower circles of disaster.

A long silence dramatized the horror of the situation. Suddenly, a voice shouted, "Klu mo! Wake up! Open your eyes!" Klu mo was unconscious. Mtsho mo pulled her out of the bus and shook her. Blood flowed from a deep wound in Mtsho mo's own forehead. She dabbed at it with her sleeve, continuing to call to Klu mo.

"Please save my child! Save my child!" Mtsho mo shrieked, clutching the Santana driver, who lay on the ground in deep shock. Mtsho mo grabbed his tie, pulled him up, and ordered him to take her and her daughter to the hospital immediately.



Mtsho mo's shouts enlivened the driver, who picked Klu mo up, put her in his battered car, and started off to the county town. Meanwhile, several police cars with blaring sirens arrived to rescue passengers who were still trapped.

Mtsho mo urged the driver to go faster. The frightened driver obeyed, as though Mtsho mo were holding a gun to the back of his head. They reached the front of the hospital and the driver carried Klu mo into the hospital, loudly calling for doctors. Two doctors came immediately and took her to the emergency room.

When Mtsho mo finally paused to take a deep breath, she fainted from shock and loss of blood from her own wounds. The driver shouted again and several nurses came to care for her.

Bde skyid, Mtsho mo's sister, reached the hospital a few hours after the accident, carefully examined Mtsho mo's stitches, and asked her if she was in pain.

Mtsho mo began crying when they turned their attention to Klu mo, who lay on the same bed, wearing an oxygen mask, with an always-dribbling IV needle stuck in her arm.

Meanwhile, Nyi ma finished lunch and waited in his dorm room for his mother and sister. He grew concerned about their delayed arrival, but he had strong faith that wherever Mtsho mo went, there would be no obstacles because he understood her to be a manifestation of Tara.

"Buzz! Buzz!" Nyi ma's cell phone vibrated in his left trouser pocket. He fumbled for his phone and punched the answer button, trembling with excitement. "Nyi ma! Where are you? Come to the Tibetan Hospital immediately. Something's happened to Mtsho mo and Klu mo," urged Bde skyid.

When Nyi ma asked what had happened, the phone went dead. Incredulous, Nyi ma stood, grabbed his school jacket from a hanger, and rushed to the hospital with mixed feelings.

"Nyi ma, come here!" Bde skyid yelled from outside the hospital gate.

"What happened, Aunt?" Nyi ma asked worriedly, after crossing the street.

"They had an accident," Bde skyid said, tears glittering.



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"The Three Jewels! Are they all right?" Nyi ma asked.

"Your mother's forehead was cut. It's not very serious. But your sister..." she said, choking.

"What happened to Klu mo? What happened?" Nyi ma demanded, clutching his aunt's shoulders.

"She's unconscious," she murmured, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Take me to her room, please!" Nyi ma urged, barely restraining his pent-up emotions.

As he entered the room where Klu mo was in bed, clad in a patient's gown with her eyes closed, he was dumbstruck. Mtsho mo lay next to her, an IV plugged into her arm as well. She burst into tears when Nyi ma entered. Grabbing his hand tightly, she wept as if Klu mo would never awaken.

"Don't worry Mother, Sister will be fine. She'll be all right," Nyi ma consoled, giving her a long, rare hug.

After Nyi ma's comfort, Mtsho mo composed herself and dried her swollen, bloodshot eyes. Nyi ma sat by his sister and looked at her intently, tears oozing from his eyes. His expression was so tight it seemed blood might ooze out. Then suddenly he jumped up and disappeared outside.

Nyi ma was terribly upset, thinking that if his mother and sister had not come to visit him, such a horrible accident would never have happened. He felt guilty and began to condemn himself for selfishly causing such tragedy.

Bde skyid found him and patted his shoulder gently. She comforted "The doctors say your sister will be fine, though she'll be unconscious for several days. Don't blame yourself. These things happen. They're inevitable. Be kind to yourself."

Nyi ma nodded without turning. He felt much relief and re-entered the room, wanting to talk to his mother, whom he had not seen in a long while.

The next day, Nyi ma's paternal and maternal grandfathers arrived with homemade bread, butter, and *rtsam pa*, planning to stay until Klu mo regained consciousness. They were less worried than Mtsho mo and comforted her during meal times. Nyi ma believed



that, with their grandfathers near, his sister would awaken soon. They were like two majestically towering mountains, protecting her from all harm and radiating hope.

Nyi ma visited the hospital when he finished his classes and silently beseeched protection from the Three Jewels to speed his sister's recovery.

The grandfathers strolled to school early each morning. When they saw him studying with other classmates, they greeted him with broad smiles. Through their smiles, Nyi ma saw their support, pride, and a bit of jealousy, the latter a testimony to never having had a chance to attend school.

Three days later, Klu mo regained consciousness, bringing smiles, hope, and joy. The doctors said she had been incredibly fortunate. Had her injury been a bit more serious she might have been permanently disabled. Though Klu mo was now conscious, she stumbled when she walked. The doctors said this would continue for several months. Mtsho mo would not leave Klu mo while she was recovering. She worried her grandparents would not be able to give her the care she needed so decided to take her to Lha sa and care for her there until she recovered completely.

After they left, Nyi ma made frequent phone calls inquiring about Klu mo's health. He could not bear the idea of her being disabled and unable to walk normally. Hearing good news about his sister's health, Nyi ma's worry began fading. His phone calls became less frequent and he refocused on his study.

Six months later, Klu mo was normal again, an outcome which her parents, her relatives, and Nyi ma had earnestly prayed for. Each had made their own contribution to her recovery. Her parents took her to famous monasteries in Lha sa, while the grandfathers constantly offered large *bsang* offerings to the local mountain and territorial deities, beseeching protection and assistance for her health. Meanwhile, Nyi ma piously prayed daily to the Three Jewels for help.

Mtsho mo returned home with Klu mo so that she could continue her study in primary school. The children's earnest desire to gain knowledge for a better future affected her deeply and her



attitude began to change about living in Lha sa. She decided to return home and lead a simple life, regardless of the cost.

#### RETURN HOME

Years after Bkra shis had first become a fugitive, he returned home with Mtsho mo. All of the incarcerated metal thieves had been released from prison. Some seemed to have aged five to ten years more than their real age. Others had obviously changed and were no longer interested in chatting. It seemed that their youth had gone like a shooting star, a mere flicker across the sky of their life. They seldom gathered as before. Everyone seemed focused on work and improving their homes.

Bkra shis and Mtsho mo were optimistic when they heard the good news of their friends' release. They hoped that the case was closed and the police would no longer hunt for Bkra shis, who sometimes regretted fleeing the police, leading a life like a hunted animal in constant sorrow and worry. Sometimes, he envied his friends for gaining their freedom, but after hearing their miserable stories of life in prison, he felt he had been very lucky not to have been incarcerated, believing he could not have survived the miseries of prison. He often showed his gratitude to the Three Jewels by offering abundant *bsang* and chanting scriptures, especially early in the morning and late at night.

Although their return brought optimism and a promising future for the families of those released, and for the community as a whole, Bkra shis never felt free and could not erase the nightmare that had tormented him for years. It was as though an evil spirit had possessed him. Nevertheless, he did his best to hide his sorrow, not wanting to sadden others. He was convinced that he would overcome these obstacles in due time.

Walking into the house where three generations had lived brought back childhood memories, a tempting world for an adult to retreat to. The wood gate decorated with animal heads and thickly smeared colors suggested the laughter and warmth that had once suffused every corner of the home. Standing before the gate, heavy



with memories, Bkra shis recalled a childhood with his parents and the happy time of becoming a father himself. What he prized most was his parents' unconditional love and compassion, and raising him to be a healthy, strong Tibetan man. He felt deeply indebted to his parents, especially now that they were in a place not bothered by sorrow and worry. He felt they were near him when he sincerely missed them. They were always deep in his heart.

As Bkra shis slowly pushed open the creaking gate, a memory of village children and grandchildren rushing into the room to ask their grandparents to tell stories flooded his mind, filling the air with a warm familial atmosphere. At the time, he had loathed the creaking sound as children scrambled into the room, banging the courtyard gate wide open with all their might. Those audacious children feared nothing. He now regretted not cherishing those times. He walked forward on stones paving the way from the gate to the room. The stones were a place to stamp mud and snow from shoes. Children, on the other hand, often saw these stones as an opportunity to play, stepping on and jumping over them as they came inside. Their shimmering eyes often forgot the stones, however, once they noticed the fruit tree that had towered in the yard for two decades, offering plenty of fruit for the family. Though saliva gathered at the corners of their thirsty mouths, their ambitious desires, fueled by chronic vitamin and mineral deficiencies, were never fulfilled since a scrawny, vicious dog was tied to a pole under the tree.

Bkra shis's grandparents had enjoyed basking in the sun on the verandah when they had free time. Visitors had gathered as the grandparents sat on homemade carpets, counting their prayer beads; gossiping about village affairs; boasting about such subjects as their attractiveness, bravery, hunting wildlife, and being a sought-after bride; prestigious family trees; telling intriguing folktales; and discussing complex local affairs. The visitors soon became an audience - children, middle-aged men, brides, and visitors - who paid rapt attention, as though the elders were telling Ge sar stories.

Entering the room was problematic for Bkra shis as a child. His innate clumsiness, particularly at the crack of dawn when family members were occupied with chores, provoked regular laughter in



the home. The familiar smell of yak milk caressed his cheeks, pulling him across the threshold like a saddled and bridled beast of burden.

In those bygone days, Pa sangs - Bkra shis's father - often scooped embers from the hearth while murmuring scriptures, placed the embers on the altar at the courtyard center, and burned offerings to the local deities. It was an honorable, daily task. His mother came in the morning with a wooden pail of milk, a smile on her face, as if she were utterly content with what the yak had offered. His elder sister kept the hearth fire burning, as the younger sister kneaded dough on the cutting board and steamed buns in a pot. Meanwhile, his elder brother lay in bed, snoring as loudly as a sleeping hog, oblivious to all around him.

Now, as a father of two children who were rapidly growing up, such memories had faded and seldom surfaced, though they were still deeply etched in his mind. Time had brought much change after returning from Lha sa. The fruit tree's leaves had already fallen, leaving denuded branches jutting into the air. The scruffy dog was long gone, released from the rain and cold it had endured for many years. Windows once covered by oiled, shiny paper had turned dull with dust and long-time neglect. Gradually approaching the once boisterous *he rdze* with heavy steps, he leaned against the adjacent wood column and stretched out his left hand to where carpets once lay, recalling the warmth that had lingered there when he was a child. He was then overcome by a memory of an event that had broken his heart.

#### COLLECTING CATERPILLAR FUNGUS

A year after returning from Lha sa, Bkra shis, Mtsho mo, and some other villagers set out for Mgo log to search for a vital income resource - caterpillar fungus, a traditional medicine. The collectors seldom considered who had started the collection of this sacred plant. Such thoughts were irrelevant to the tens of thousands of poor people who streamed into high altitude Tibetan areas, eager to collect and sell this precious herb. The more religiously inclined questioned the wisdom of removing such rare plants from the land, thinking there



were reasons for such herbs to grow there and worried about punishment from land deities. Nevertheless, the desire for a better material life always won out.

As the years passed, the collection and sale of caterpillar fungus became an integral part of their annual income. They knew that collecting the herb was destroying the land, the land that their ancestors had fought to protect with their lives and blood, and regretted this destruction. Though local government made regular announcements about the importance of protecting the land, they were ignored. Living comes first and the income from collecting and selling the herb brought benefits nothing else could.

The bus to Mgo log set out from Zi ling, a journey that took about seven hours along muddy, twisting routes. Due to reports of accidents on the way, passengers worried about the bus trip. Tibetans held prayer beads, chanting the Six Sacred Syllables constantly, beseeching protection and strength from the Three Jewels. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo behaved the same as the others. Bkra shis's constant companion was a book of religious recitations he always carried when he traveled to a distant destination. He often chanted at the crack of dawn to obtain confidence and protection. Though Mtsho mo had never been to school, her illiteracy did not stop her from reciting scriptures that every adult villager knew. She murmured without pause as the bus chugged along.

The weather in the third lunar month was unpleasant. Constant wind assaulted their already burned cheeks, piercing their flesh. Passengers bundled in layers of clothes disembarked after the bus reached the first station in Mgo log. They then rented share-taxis for fifty RMB per person and sped toward herders' tents. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo huddled together in the private car they had rented and reached a herder's tent after an hour's ride.

"Hello! Welcome! You two must have had a rough journey! Please sit near the hearth!" the tent's hosts chorused, welcoming them into their cozy tent.

Bkra shis and Mtsho mo thanked them, deeply grateful for this warm reception, and offered the gifts they had brought. Strong, fragrant butter tea was immediately served. Burning wood and dung



crackled and popped in the hearth. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo held their bowls of tea, warming their hands. As the hosts added more yak dung to the fire, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo removed some of their outer garments and soon were caught up in lively conversation as if they had been reunited with loved ones whom they had not seen for decades. Wolves howled in the distance as if summoning all the wolves in the world for a hunt. Lights in the tents began dimming and the stars became visible. When the tent where Bkra shis and Mtsho mo slept went dark, the unremitting wind and wolf howls reigned supreme.

Snowflakes began tumbling earthward at daybreak, as though welcoming Bkra shis and Mtsho mo, soon cloaking the earth in white. The couple got up and headed to the part of the grassland the herder owned and for which they had paid 2,000 RMB for the right to collect caterpillar fungus. The herders accompanied them, warned them not to go further than the boundaries of their land to avoid disputes with other landowners, and then returned to their tent. Meanwhile, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo searched for the precious herb hidden in the snow-covered grass.

An unpleasant, frosty wind howled from dawn to dusk, swirling snowflakes into drifts. The sun, shrouded in thick clouds, hung in the far distance as if imprisoned in a sky jail. A thick, homemade scarf encircled Bkra shis's neck. Under a sheepskin hat, old-fashioned, large-lens sunglasses perched on his sharp nose, so that he resembled a mountain climber. Mtsho mo wore a thick scarf of the type her village women favored, exposing only her classically beautiful eyes. They continued searching for the herb despite the frigid ground and bothersome wind.

They collected ten herbs on the first day. Some diggers returned to their tents empty-handed. The herbs would later be sun-dried and stored in a dry place to prevent mold.

After repeated invitations, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo spent the second night in the herder's tent. She sincerely cared about Bkra shis and Mtsho mo, valuing friendship as much as money. She knew full well the harsh living conditions the diggers endured during the two-



month collection period. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo were immensely appreciative, but did not wish to impose.

The housewife began her chores early the next morning. After a quick breakfast, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo set out to pitch a tent that would be their refuge for the next two months. They carried on their backs what was required to set up the tent, trudging into the foggy distance. The housewife watched them until the tent door curtain settled back in place.

Bkra shis and Mtsho mo rose every morning and set out searching for the herb. As spring progressed, the fog was frequent, waking the hibernating soil, encouraging the herbs to grow. The sun often glittered in the sky, emanating soothing light, empowering soil, water, trees, and all that depended on sunshine. The couple left their tent early and, after locating patches of herbs, smiled broadly as their cloth herb containers bulged when they returned to their shabby tent in the evening. After drying, they carefully wrapped the herbs in dry, clean cloth, and hid them where others would not easily find them.

One special morning, the sun shimmered in an invigoratingly cloudless sky of flawless clarity, suggesting a newly-wiped mirror. Snowflakes that had accumulated atop tents began melting. Water plopped on the ground, making small cavities in the snow. Fog rippled above the ground like ocean waves. Such soothing weather was as rare as turtle feathers. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo yearned to sit and enjoy this spectacular natural display, but they had to search for herbs.

#### GRANDMOTHER'S ILLNESS

As Bkra shis and Mtsho mo continued searching in the challenging weather at high altitude in order to accumulate money to repair their run-down house and send their children to school, bad news came. The landowner, Dkon mchog, who was in his thirties, approached Bkra shis, who had been crawling on the ground in the late morning, wrapped in a thick sheepskin robe, searching for the elusive herb. Dkon mchog told Bkra shis he had a long-distance call. Bkra shis noticed nothing dire from the landowner's impassive expression. He



stood, brushing the dirt off his pants, relaxed his cramped muscles, and followed Dkon mchog, who was already nearly beyond his field of vision.

"Mother isn't well. Her condition is rapidly deteriorating. Come home quickly if you want to see her, otherwise..." his sister, Dkar mo, said and then choked and began sobbing.

Bkra shis was overwhelmed by this sudden, shocking news before asking in concern, "Will she hold out until I get home?"

"I don't know. I don't really know..." Dkar mo sobbed.

"Don't weep, talk to me!" Bkra shis demanded, raising his voice a bit, impatient with her futile tears.

A familiar voice replaced that of his sister. "Hello! Son! The doctors say your mother has severe respiratory problems. According to my experience, she'll last until you arrive home, maybe longer," Pa sangs said, providing reassurance and comfort.

"If that's the case, I must return. I can't bear her leaving without seeing her," Bkra shis announced.

"Don't be impulsive. There's another issue you must confront," Pa sangs cautioned.

"What's that?" asked Bkra shis, detecting the grave concern in Pa sang's voice.

"After all these years, those government dogs still want to punish you," reminded Pa sangs.

"Are you saying they'll seize any chance they can, including Mother's illness," asked Bkra shis.

"Yes. They might see this as an unprecedented chance," Pa sangs said thoughtfully. "You'd better wait and see how things go."

"Yes, but I must see Mother before she leaves this world. I can strive for freedom even if I am imprisoned, but I cannot have a mother twice in this life. I'm also sure I don't deserve the death penalty for what I did if those laws written on white paper with black letters are ever applied fairly," Bkra shis said.

"I'm proud of what you said. I'll always support you," Pa sangs replied, moved by his son's powerful statement.

Bkra shis returned to his tent on a horse Dkon mchog lent him. He waved and shouted to Mtsho mo, who was crawling along a



slope searching for herbs, signaling her to return to their tent. As Bkra shis yelled, the horse stood steady, the only sign of movement being its ears that wiggled back and forth.

A sudden twinge ran up Mtsho mo's spine. Bkra shis's shouts suggested something ominous. She worried about her son and daughter. With her heart pounding fast and feeling as though all her blood was congregating in her mouth, she jogged toward the tent. "What happened?" she asked worriedly, upon entering the tent.

Bkra shis had just finished gulping down a bowl of milk tea from a thermos of tea Mtsho mo had boiled that morning. He rubbed his mouth with his robe sleeve, and turning to Mtsho mo said, "Mother's health is deteriorating. Father just called. I must return home now or I won't see her again in this life."

Shocked and dumbstruck, Mtsho mo stared at Bkra shis gravely. "You're right. We must return immediately. We can come again next year to collect herbs, but you only have one mother."

"Please stay and continue collecting herbs. My going is enough," Bkra shis said.

"No, I've already decided. I'm sure I can be helpful," Mtsho mo insisted. Gratitude flashed across Bkra shis's weather-beaten, handsome face. They began packing up their gear, which they asked Dkon mchog's family to care for until they returned the following year.

After a quick farewell and sincere thanks to the herder's family for their hospitality, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo hired a mini-bus for 120 RMB and headed home. They encouraged the driver to go fast as they prayed and beseeched the deities for a safe journey. Once back in the capital city, they boarded an old bus and headed homeward.

#### GRANDFATHER'S VISIT

"If we were back in old society, your skin would already have been peeled off and your flesh fed to dogs for betraying your relatives. Your flesh would have disgusted even the dogs. What do you think?" Pa sangs, Dpal ldan's maternal uncle, said forcefully. Pa sangs



continued, "However, the world has changed. We are all protected under so-called government laws and we can no longer punish you in the old ways."

Dpal ldan's betrayal had resulted in Bkra shis's friends being imprisoned. Visits from their relatives were allowed only once a year. As Pa sangs thought of that painful period of imprisonment a decade ago, resentment that he had kept deep in his heart awakened. He considered dismembering this man with a sharp knife.

"Everything you said is completely true. I am a dog," Dpal ldan guiltily admitted.

Even a good dog doesn't betray its master!" Pa sangs bellowed.

"I'm worse than a dog. Worse..." Dpal ldan stammered.

"You've been promoted to chief of the township police department because of your excellent work," Pa sangs said. "Here is one last favor you must do for my son and other relatives who have suffered in prison as compensation. That's all I ask."

"I'm listening and I'll help if I can," Dpal ldan replied as if threatened by a gunman.

"I've heard rumors that there will be a police operation to clean up some lingering cases, including arresting my son. Is this true?" Pa sangs said.

"Er... yes, it is," Dpal ldan confirmed slowly after a long hesitation.

"Swear you aren't fooling us this time? If you are, you will be in a serious trouble," threatened Pa sangs, pointing his index finger at Dpal ldan's forehead.

"I swear," pleaded Dpal ldan.

"My wife is dying and I worry that she might not last until her favorite son returns from Mgo log. If she has the chance to see him, she might not leave us so soon. She needs her son's company when she leaves us forever."

"I fully understand," Dpal ldan replied.

"During his time with his mother, I hope there is no disturbance from you and your crew. I despise those who never respect life and find whatever means to attain their goals."



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"It will be as you wish," conceded Dpal ldan.

"You'd better keep your promise," Pa sangs warned.

After Pa sangs's departure, the tired officer leaned back into his cozy sofa, as if he had been mining coal all day. Pa sangs's strong words echoed and re-echoed in his mind. He imagined they might kidnap his only son or bomb his house if he did not comply. He stood and reached for his desk phone that sat under a bright lamp in the corner of the living room, and dialed a number he could not be more familiar with.

#### BZANG MO'S CONFESSION

Bkra shis's return and presence brought hope and joy to Bzang mo and consoled the other family members. However, her plumpness rapidly faded, revealing sharp cheekbones. When a local *bla ma* suggested taking her to the county town hospital, Mtsho mo accompanied her. Bkra shis stayed at home after his relatives convinced him that somebody might report his presence to the county town police to get the reward on his head. He constantly beseeched Buddha to help his mother rapidly recover.

The relatively advanced care at the county town hospital ensured Bzang mo would have a few more months of worldly life, though she felt she had experienced and seen enough. She wished she could leave the world sooner rather than suffering in bed, burdening her family members. However, on days when the sun beamed brightly in the cloudless sky, she enjoyed going outside after her treatments. The gentle breeze on her cheeks, the fluttering poplar foliage, and Mtsho mo's companionship were all pleasant.

At times, Mtsho mo's care and assistance reminded her of the time when she had been a new bride, as beautiful as a flawless rose. She admired Mtsho mo's relative youth and beauty and, over the years, had felt a certain jealousy, fearing that if she praised Mtsho mo to friends and relatives, she would lose her own position in the family. While in the hospital, however, she reflected on how Mtsho mo had served her, Pa sangs, and other family members over the years, and had never complained. Bzang mo became much more



sympathetic and felt guilty for what she now understood to be years of mistreatment.

Bzang mo summoned her courage late one night and said, "As the saying goes, 'When death draws near, words become meaningful.' I never imagined I would understand this proverb when I was as young as you but now, with death near, I fully understand. Your father-in-law and I have never treated you as a full member of our family, often excluding you as someone who occupied our son's attention. I was immature and blind with jealousy, though I had given birth to several children by the time you joined our family. I worried you would take my position in the family, push me aside, and mistreat me. That's what seems to happen in every Tibetan family. My husband once poured hot tea on you when you accidentally served me tea that had not yet boiled. You must resent us when you recall these unpleasant things," Bzang mo concluded.

Mtsho mo was speechless and felt all her resentment vanish like vapor. Gently, she pushed a strand of hair from the side of her face and said, "You think too much. I'm sure you must have been in the same sort of situation. You survived very hard, chaotic times. Although it's never been easy for me, I tried to be patient and endure those difficult days, believing such trials would eventually end. Such treatment of daughters-in-law is ingrained in our culture. What a tragedy!"

Bzang mo continued, "When you two left the family, the division of property was unfair. I must confess this or I won't be able to close my eyes when I die. I sincerely hope you forgive my unfairness. I hope for another life to make up for all the wrongs I've done."

"I understand. You don't need to apologize. I'm content with being a daughter-in-law," Mtsho mo comforted tearfully.

"You have two lovely children. Be proud of them. There's no doubt they will have bright futures. I wish to live until they are married and have beautiful children, laughing and playing around, but I'm sure that is impossible. I will be long gone by that time," reflected Bzang mo.



A smile illuminated Bzang mo's face, as though a long-buried knot of sorrow had finally untangled. She stared at Mtsho mo in a way that signaled her full acceptance of her as a member of the family, which seemed now too late and unnecessary.

Bzang mo dozed off. Mtsho mo pulled her bed blanket to cover her exposed hands and prepared a bed for herself on an old stained sofa next to Bzang mo's bed.

Bkra shis's anxiety increased as he waited for his mother's return. Understanding her bleak prospects, he paced in the yard, deep in thought. Sometimes he sat in a chair for hours, wrapping tobacco in slips of newspaper, and after a few puffs, extinguishing them in an ashtray littered with numerous partially-smoked cigarettes. Whenever he could no longer suppress his anxiety, he went outside and walked back and forth on the threshing ground near his home. Before, he had not dared even step outside his home, fearing some villagers might reveal his presence to the police. Now, he frequently ventured out, not caring what others might see and do. In the face of his mother's ill health, all else seemed trivial.

As for the police, maybe they had heard of Bzang mo's poor health, perhaps Pa sangs's visit to the police chief's home had worked, or maybe they were showing respect for Bkra shis. At any rate, they never appeared in uniform.

#### UNCLE'S MARRIAGE

Bzang mo returned home two months later. She was healthier, chatted with relatives and other villagers, her limbs moving as well as when she was in her twenties and thirties, and she walked unaided. The sense of impending doom, which had hung in the air like black clouds before a destructive storm, had vanished.

Pa sangs believed Bzang mo's return to good health was because of the Three Jewels' intervention, further proof of their compassion for sentient beings mired in misfortune. Afterward, Pa sangs rose before dawn and recited scriptures as though he was a religious figure. When there were glowing embers in the stove, he immediately approached the stove, collected the embers, and burned



offerings in the altar after cleaning his hands. Every movement indicated his sense of intense gratitude that his beloved was with him again.

Tshe dbang, Bkra shis's youngest brother, had dropped out of school because of his poor performance on an exam. Passing that exam would have immediately landed him a job, ensuring a comfortable, stable life. He was one of the top three students in his village primary school, as well as in the first year of junior middle school. He had received several awards. Pa sangs mentioned his excellent academic performance at mealtimes, praising him as an exemplary model. Yet, his later performance in school accurately proved a Tibetan proverb, 'A crow's son gets blacker, while a magpie's son gets brighter and more colorful'. Tshe dbang clearly was in the crow category. Even though his acute mind made him a star in his class, his keen intelligence was coupled with laziness, bad habits, and negative influences from friends, which culminated in him becoming one of the worst students in his last term of junior middle school.

Hundreds of beer bottles were his confidants. He spent much time in dirty, unkempt movie rooms in forlorn corners of the county town. At times, he slept for many hours, as though he had ventured through a vast desert and eventually found his way home. Such behavior foretold his poor performance on the highly competitive entrance examination to senior middle school. Tshe dbang seemed destined to be a man with a shovel, though his parents had hoped pen and paper would be his more frequent companions.

His failure in education, Bzang mo's deteriorating health, his oldest brother's separation from his parents to establish his own household - all pushed his parents to find him a bride so the new couple would care for them and deal with family issues. It all seemed perfectly arranged for Tshe dbang. He was, after all, the youngest son and this was the time-honored, cultural duty of such a son. Tshe dbang was seventeen and what he thought of such arrangements was irrelevant.

After Pa sangs's brief trip to an agro-pastoral village, a young woman named Phyug mo, who was around her future husband's age,



was invited into their home. Tshe dbang accepted all this and got along well with his wife. It was his mother's last great wish.

#### BKRA SHIS'S FREEDOM

Three months after the marriage, Bzang mo quietly passed away while sitting in an upholstered chair late one afternoon when the sun's weakening rays scattered in the sky, making thousands of lumps of crimson clouds, which seemed to be mourning her departure. Her death caused quite a stir. Rumors circulated that mothers-in-law were destined to have short lives after taking a new bride into their home, especially a bride for the youngest son.

During the mandatory seven weeks of mourning, a member from each village family came to the bereaved family bringing firewood, cooking oil, and fried bread to help feed visitors from different villages. Phyug mo's father, Tshe b+ha, visited Pa sangs's home one sunny day during the days of mourning. A *sngags pa* 'tantric practitioner', he volunteered to chant for the roaming spirit in a separate room while monks recited in the main room.

After seeing off guests in the late evening, Pa sangs and Tshe b+ha had a conversation that ultimately led to Bkra shis's freedom. "You are so lucky to have had such a warm-hearted, benevolent wife," Tshe b+ha said.

"Yes, she was the kindest person. I am privileged to have met a woman like her in this life. Sadly, I was never a very good husband. I was very immature when she married and moved into my home," Pa sangs said.

"Life is like that. You don't understand a person's value until they're gone. I understand your circumstance - it's as though half your soul has been taken away. Though my wife left a decade ago, I think of her every day, but my grief will never bring her back. I felt I could not live without her company the first few months after her departure. I then decided she would be glad if I lived a few more years. Afterward, I dedicated most of my time to chanting and accumulating merit in the hope of having a better incarnation in my next life. A human life is so precious. My point is that you must



accept the circle of life and death. Nobody lives forever. Chant more scriptures, circumambulate monasteries, be moderate, and don't think too much," advised Tshe b+ha compassionately.

Pa sangs and Tshe b+ha smoked for a time and then Tshe b+ha continued, "Phyug mo mentioned Bkra shis's miserable condition when she last visited me. Have you thought of a solution?"

"I contacted those I know, but it all has ended in failure. Now, I think being a fugitive for life is Bkra shis's destiny," Pa sangs said.

"One of my relatives has a contact in a provincial-level office. He skillfully helped me with several issues that were much more serious than your son's. Without his help, some men in my community would have been imprisoned for at least five or six years," confided Tshe b+ha.

"Are you serious? If you could help my son regain his freedom, I'd be eternally grateful," exclaimed Pa sangs.

"We're relatives now that my daughter has married into your home. Helping each other is what relatives should do," Tshe b+ha concluded.

A saddle was already on Tshe b+ha's horse when he was ready to depart. With agility, he mounted and soon vanished into the distance, riding toward his home. Pa sangs placed his clasped wrinkled hands to his forehead piously, hoping for his son's freedom.

A few months later, everyone was impatiently anticipating the advent of the Tibetan New Year. Pa sangs was intently removing bristles from a hog's head in front of the kitchen stove and did not notice the guest until he had reached the threshold of the room and yelled out his name.

Tshe b+ha was immediately served milk tea and fresh bread when he sat near the hearth. "Your son is now free," Tshe b+ha announced happily, very pleased with himself.

Pa sangs was motionless and bewildered. The tranquility of the moment was broken by a simple question, "Are you serious?"

"Yes, your son is now free," Tshe b+ha repeated, enunciating every word clearly.

"No need to stay in prison for even a few months like one of his friends?" Pa sangs asked disbelievingly.



"That's right," Tshe b+ha replied.

"Seek protection from the Three Jewels!" exclaimed Pa sangs and then repeated this familiar phrase several times in appreciation of what he was sure was their assistance.

At this moment, Bkra shis entered, approached Tshe b+ha, and handing him something wrapped in a thickly embroidered cloth said, "You must take this money as a token of my appreciation. Although we cannot fully compensate you for your help, this represents our gratitude. Please take it."

Bkra shis thus regained his freedom. His crime files had been erased at the relevant departments - gone forever like dinosaurs that had vanished from the earth. What's more, these departments received an anonymous fax that read:

It is no longer needed nor allowed to pursue Bkra shis as a wanted criminal. Whoever violates this message must bear all the consequences. Such a person is looking for trouble for himself and all his relatives. Circulate this message to those involved.

#### BKRA SHIS'S MEMORIES

Drops of tears gathered and glittered at the corners of Bkra shis's bloodshot eyes as he drew back from remembering. Thick dust fell from the shabby, disheveled ceiling that had not been repaired since his parents' departure. He slowly retreated from the room where his parents, with joy and sorrow, had spent most of their life with their children, grandsons, and granddaughters, and where they had taken their last breaths. Tears trickled down his cheeks when he reached the courtyard. Reluctantly raising his grubby hand, he brushed away the tears. He stared at the wetness on the back of his hand for a while and then smiled broadly. Letting the tears flow gently down his hand to the ground, he waited as they seeped into the soil and then bolted the wood gate from outside, exchanging the outdated, clunky lock for a stronger, modern one, and left for his own home.

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"Bkra shis, you might get cold if you don't use the quilt," Mtsho mo chastised a second time.

"OK," Bkra shis replied, returning from his memories of struggling for freedom and of his mother, whom he missed terribly. He had stayed in bed for hours.

"Sleep. You must go to town tomorrow to shop. The New Year draws near," Mtsho mo said drowsily.

Bkra shis was stimulated, thinking of the New Year's approach. He no longer needed to worry about lack of money for purchasing New Year articles now that he had regained his freedom and could go anywhere to earn money. His miserable life of hiding for more than nine years was over.

He gently pulled the quilt over his body and relaxed on the bed where for countless nights he had been awakened by nightmares. He fell into a peaceful sleep the likes of which he had not experienced for a very long time.



## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'ba' blo bzang mgon po འབའ་བློ་བཟང་མགོན་པོ།

'ba' thang འབའ་ཐང་།

'bri འབྲི།

'bri stod འབྲི་སྟོད།

'bru gu chung འབྲུ་གུ་ཆུང་།

'brug mo འབྲུག་མོ།

'dzin bdag འཛིན་བདག་།

'jam dbyangs bkra shis འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

'ong bzang འོང་བཟང་།

'phrin las nyi ma འཕྲིན་ལས་ཉི་མ།

'ur rdo འུར་རྡོ།

a du ཨ་དུ།

a khu ཨ་ཁུ།

a ma ཨ་མ།

a mchog ཨ་མཚོག་།

a mchod a lo ཨ་མཚོད་ཨ་ལོ།

a mdo ཨ་མདོ།

a mgon ཨ་མགོན།

Amuquhu འུམ་ཀུ་མུ།

a myes bya khyung ཨ་མྱེས་བྱ་ཀྱུང་།

a stag ཨ་སྟག་།

Aba འ་པ།

ba gan བ་གན།

ba. lobsang gonbo, 'ba' blo bzang mgon po འབའ་བློ་བཟང་མགོན་པོ།

Bagan འ་གན་

banzhang བ་རྩ་མཇུག་།



banzhuren 班主任

bar skor བར་སྐོར།

bcu pa'i lnga mchod བཅུ་པའི་ལྔ་མཚན།

bde chen བདེ་ཆེན།

bde skyid བདེ་སྐྱིད།

bkra b+ha བརྒྱ་མ།

bkra g.yang བརྒྱ་གཡང་།

bkra kho བརྒྱ་ཁོ།

bkra shis བརྒྱ་ཤིས།

bkra shis don 'grub བརྒྱ་ཤིས་དོན་འགྲུབ།

bkra shis rab brtan བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རབ་བརྟན།

bkra shis rnam dkar བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རྣམ་དགར།

bkra skyid བརྒྱ་སྐྱིད།

bla brang ལྷ་བར་།

bla ma ལྷ་མ།

bla ma 'brong ལྷ་མ་འབྲོང་།

bla ma wa shes mgo dkar ལྷ་མ་ལ་ཤེས་མགོ་དགར།

blo bzang ལྷོ་བཟང་།

blo bzang tshe ring ལྷོ་བཟང་ཚེ་རིང་།

blon che ལྷོན་ཅེ།

blon che bde chen ལྷོན་ཅེ་བདེ་ཆེན།

blon che rga ra ལྷོན་ཅེ་རྟ་ར།

brag 'go བྲག་འགོ།

bsang བསང་།

bsang chu བསང་ཆུ།

bsang khog བསང་ཁོག།

bstan 'dzin བསྟན་འཛིན།



bsod grags བསོད་གྲགས།  
 bsod nams བསོད་ནམས།  
 bsod tshe བསོད་ཚེ།  
 btsal ba བཅའ་བ།  
 btsan khang བཅན་ཁང་།  
 Buddha Shakyamuni, sangs rgyas shAkya mu ne སངས་རྒྱལ་ཤུ་མུ་ནེ།  
 bya khyung བྱ་ཁྱུང་།  
 byang chub བྱང་ཆུབ།  
 bzang kho བཟང་ཁོ།  
 bzang mo བཟང་མོ།  
 bzhag ldom བཞག་ལྷོ་མ།  
 Chalitong 查里通  
 Chanaihai 查乃亥  
 Chengdu 成都  
 Chenlinima 陈立尼玛  
 chos dbyangs ཆོས་དབྱིངས།  
 chos lo ཆོས་ལོ།  
 chos skyid ཆོས་སྦྱིད།  
 chos skyong ཆོས་སྦྱོང་།  
 chu ma ཆུ་མ།  
 Cuogankou 措干口  
 Cuozhou 措周  
 Dala 达拉  
 Dalai Lama, tA la'i bla ma ཏཱ་ལའི་བླ་མ།  
 dar rgyas དར་རྒྱས།  
 dbang chen དབང་ཆེན།  
 dbang mo དབང་མོ།



dbang phyug དབང་ཕྱུག

dbang rgyal དབང་རྒྱལ།

dga' lung དགའ་ལུང།

dge lugs pa དགེ་ལུགས་པ།

dgo dgo dgo དགོ་དགོ་དགོ།

dgon lung dgon pa དགོན་ལུང་དགོན་པ།

dgos 'dod nor bu དགོས་འདོད་ནོར་བུ།

dgu chu དགུ་ཅུ།

Diqing 迪庆

dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས།

dkar mo དཀར་མོ།

dkar po sman rdza དཀར་པོ་སྐར་རྩ།

dkon mchog དོན་མཆོག

dkon mchog mtsho དོན་མཆོག་མཚོ།

do po དོ་པོ།

dom mgo bla ma tshe ring o rgyan རོམ་མགོ་བླ་མ་ཚེ་རིང་ཨོ་རྒྱལ།

don 'grub རོན་འགྲུབ།

don grub རོན་གྲུབ།

don kho རོན་ཁོ།

Dongwei 东维

dpa' brtse rgyal དཔའ་བརྩེ་རྒྱལ།

dpa' le དཔའ་ལེ།

dpa' ris དཔའ་རིས།

dpal 'bum དཔལ་འབུམ།

dpal 'dzoms དཔལ་འཛོམས།

dpal ldan དཔལ་ལྷན།

Dpal nalanda, dbal nA len+d+ra དཔལ་ན་ལེ་ན།



dpal rgyal དཔལ་རྒྱལ།

Duowa 多哇

fu banzhang 副班长

g.yang ldan གཡང་ལྷན།

g.yang mo གཡང་མོ།

g.yang mtsho skyid གཡང་མཚོ་སྦྱིད།

g.yang skyabs གཡང་སྐུབས།

g.yu 'brug གཡུ་འབྲུག།

gang skyid གང་སྦྱིད།

Gangcha 岗察

gangs lha གངས་ལྷ།

gangs mdzes གངས་མཛེས།

gangs skyabs གངས་སྐུབས།

Gannan 甘南

Gansu 甘肃

Ganzi 甘孜

gaokao 高考

gdor lo གདོད་ལོ།

ge sar གེ་སར།

ge sar, ge sar rgyal po གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོ།

gelsang lha mo, skal bzang lha mo གླགས་ལམ་བཟང་ལྷ་མོ།

gnyan chen གཉན་ཆེན།

gnyan chen thang lha གཉན་ཆེན་ཐང་ལྷ།

go log ma གོ་ལོག་མ།

gro ma གྲོ་མ།

gru ba lung གུ་བ་ལུང་།

gser gzhong གཤེར་གཞོང་།



gser mtsho གསེར་མཚོ།  
 gser skyid me tog གསེར་སྐྱིད་མེ་ཏོག  
 gsol ston mgo gzur གསོལ་སྟོན་མགོ་གཟུར།  
 gtsos གཙོས།  
 gu ru གུ་རུ།  
 gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས།  
 Guinan 贵南  
 Guoluo 果洛  
 Guomaying 过马营  
 g.yang ru གཡང་རུ།  
 Haidong 海东  
 Hainan 海南  
 ham mtha' bla ma ཧམ་མཐའ་བླ་མ།  
 Han 汉  
 he rdze ཧེ་རེ།  
 ho thA ཧོ་ཐ།  
 Hongqi 红旗  
 Hongyuan 红原  
 hor ཧོར།  
 hor gtsang kirti ཧོར་གཙང་གི་རྟེ།  
 hor gtsang ཧོར་གཙང་།  
 hu ra 'gab ma ཧུ་ར་འགབ་མ།  
 Hualong 化隆  
 Huang 黄  
 Huangnan 黄南  
 huatse gyal, dpa' brtse rgyal ཧལ་ཙེ་རྒྱལ་དཔ་བརྟེ་རྒྱལ།  
 Huazangsi 华藏寺



Hui 回

Jiangrong 江茸

Jianzha County Number One Nationalities' Middle School, Jian zha  
xian di yi min zhong 尖扎县第一民中

jo khang རྫོགས་ཀྱི་ཁང་།

ka la pa ཀ་ལ་པ།

kan lho ཀན་ལྷོ།

kha btags ཁ་བཏགས།

kha dar ཁ་དར།

khang gsar ཁང་གསར།

khol mo ཁོ་མོ།

khri ka ཁྱི་ཀ།

khyod kyi phyogs nas ka langs langs byed ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཕྱོགས་ནས་ཀ་ལངས་ལངས་བྱེད།

khyung mchu ཁྱུང་མཚུ།

klu mo ཁུ་མོ།

klu rgyal 'bum ཁུ་རྒྱལ་འུམ།

klu sgron ཁུ་སྒོན།

klu thar rgyal ཁུ་ཐར་རྒྱལ།

kong btsan ཀོང་བཙན།

kun mkhyen ཀུན་མཁྱེན།

kun mkhyen bla ma ཀུན་མཁྱེན་བླ་མ།

Kunming རྫོ་མམ་མེད།

ku'u sgang ཀུ་ཡུ་སྐང་།

lab tse ལ་བ་ཙེ།

lag btsog pa ལག་བཙོག་པ།

lag rdo ལག་རྡོ།

lan kru'u ལན་ཀུ་ཡུ།



Lanzhou 兰州

ldong nge ལྷོང་ངེ།

Lei Feng 雷锋

lha 'dzoms ལྷ་འཛོམས།

lha mo ལྷ་མོ།

lha rgyal lo ལྷ་རྒྱལ་ལོ།

lha ri ལྷ་རི།

lha sa ལྷ་ས།

lha sgron ལྷ་སྒྲོན།

lhun 'grub ལྷུན་འགྲུབ།

lhundrom, lhun 'grub ལྷུན་འགྲུབ།

li shul ལི་ཤུལ།

lnga skyong ལྷ་སྒྲོང་།

lo sar ལོ་སར།

ma ne མ་ནེ།

ma Ni མ་ཏི།

mang ra མང་ར།

mar pa lo tsA ba མར་པ་ལོ་ཙ་པ།

mda' mdo མདའ་མདོ།

mdo ba མདོ་བ།

mdzo mo མཛོ་མོ།

mdzo sna མཛོ་སྤ།

mdzod dge མཛོད་དགེ།

me tog smon lam མེ་ཏོག་སྐྱོན་ལམ།

mgo log མགོ་ལོག།

mgo mang མགོ་མང།

mgon po མགོན་པོ།







nyag rong ཉག་རོང་།  
 nyi ma ཉི་མ།  
 nyi ma rgyal mtshan ཉི་མ་རྒྱལ་མཚན།  
 nyi ma skyid ཉི་མ་སྦྱིད།  
 nyima gyamtsan, nyi ma rgyal mtshan ཉི་མ་རྒྱལ་མཚན།  
 o lo ཨོ་ལོ།  
 o tho ཨོ་ཐོ།  
 oM ma Ni pad+me hUM ཨོ་མ་ཌི་པ་དེ་ཏུ།  
 pa sangs པ་སངས།  
 pad ma པད་མ།  
 pad ma rgya mtsho པད་མ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།  
 pad ma rin chen པད་མ་རིན་ཆེན།  
 pad ma skyabs པད་མ་སྐྱབས།  
 pad mo པད་མོ།  
 pad+ma dbang chen པད་མ་དབང་ཆེན།  
 pad+ma skyabs པད་མ་སྐྱབས།  
 pho rin ཕོ་རིན།  
 phun tshogs ཕུན་ཚོགས།  
 phyug mo ཕྱུག་མོ།  
 po ta la བོ་ཏ་ལ།  
 Qiang 羌  
 Qinghai 青海  
 Qinghai Normal University, Qinghai shifan daxue 青海师范大学  
 rab rgyas རབ་རྒྱས།  
 rdo kho རོ་ཁོ།  
 rdo mtsho རོ་མཚོ།  
 rdo rje རོ་རྗེ།



rdo rje don grub རོ་རྒྱལ་དོན་གྲུབ།  
 rdo rje skyabs རོ་རྒྱལ་སྐྱེལ་སྐུ་སྐུ།  
 rdor b+ha རོ་རྒྱལ་བླ་མ།  
 reb gong རེབ་གོང་།  
 Redangba 热当坝  
 rgya mtsho རྒྱལ་མཚོ།  
 rgya ri zhing རྒྱལ་རི་མཚོ།  
 rgyal mtshan རྒྱལ་མཚན།  
 ri bong blo ldan རི་བོང་བློ་ལྷན།  
 ri lung རི་ལུང་།  
 rin chen རིན་ཆེན།  
 rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རོ་རྒྱལ།  
 rje btsun mi la ras pa རྒྱལ་བུ་སྐུ་མི་ལ་རས་པ།  
 rje tsong kha ba རྒྱལ་མཚན་ཁ་པ།  
 rka khog རྒྱལ་ཁོག་།  
 rkang tsha རྒྱལ་མཚན་།  
 rlung rta རྒྱལ་རྒྱལ་།  
 rma chu རྒྱལ་ཆུ།  
 rma chu chu wa ma རྒྱལ་ཆུ་ཆུ་ལ་མ།  
 rma lho རྒྱལ་ལྷོ།  
 rma me tog thang རྒྱལ་མེ་ཏོག་ཐང་།  
 RMB 人民币  
 rnam shes རྒྱལ་མེས་།  
 rnga ba རྒྱལ་པ།  
 rog ldang རོག་ལྷན་།  
 rong ru ma རོང་རུ་མ།  
 rtsam pa རུ་མ་པ།



rtsed thang རྩེད་ཐང་།

Ruoergai 若尔盖

sa 'bud ས་འབུད།

Salar, Sala 撒拉

sangs kho སངས་ཁོ།

sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱས་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

sangs rgyas mtsho སངས་རྒྱས་མཚོ།

se chen སེ་ཆེན།

se ra སེ་ར།

ser སེར།

ser mkhan chen སེར་མཁན་ཆེན།

ser sna can སེར་སྐ་ཅན།

sgom pa སློམ་པ།

sgrol ma སྒྲོལ་མ།

sgron ma སྒྲོན་མ།

sha bo ཤ་བ།

sha rdo ཤ་རོ།

sha sbrang ཤ་སྤང་།

Shaanxi 陕西

Shambhala, sham b+ha la ཤམ་བླ་ལ།

shis chu ཤིས་ཅུ།

shug pa ri la bcad nas ri la mchod ཤུག་པ་རི་ལ་བཅད་ནས་རི་ལ་མཆོད།

si rigs སི་རིགས།

Sichuan 四川

skal bzang སྐལ་བཟང་།

skal bzang lha mo སྐལ་བཟང་ལྷ་མོ།

skal ldan སྐལ་ལྷན།



shar skyabs mgon ki rti ཤར་སྐལ་མགོན་རྟེན་གྲི།  
 ske 'khyog སྐེ་འཁྱུག།  
 skra dang skra loi skor gyi bsam gzhigs སྐྱ་དང་སྐྱ་ལོ་སྐྱ་རྟེན་གྱི་བསམ་གཞིགས།  
 skya dga' སྐྱ་དགའ།  
 skya rgya སྐྱ་རྒྱ།  
 skya rong སྐྱ་རོང།  
 skyid 'dzoms སྐྱིད་འཛོམས།  
 skyid mtsho སྐྱིད་མཚོ།  
 sman bla skyabs སྐྱམ་བླ་སྐལ་མགོན།  
 sman pa tshon po སྐྱམ་པ་ཚོན་པོ།  
 sre mong སྤེལ་མོང།  
 sngags pa སྤྲུག་པ།  
 sngon lung སྤོན་ལུང།  
 snying dkar rgyal སྤྱིང་དཀར་རྒྱལ།

Southwest University for Nationalities, Xinan minzu daxue 西南民族大学

大学

spyang ras gzigs སྤྱུང་རས་གཞིགས།  
 spyang ki'i rna chos bshad སྤྱུང་རྟེན་རྒྱུ་ཆོས་བཤད།  
 srib nag སྤེལ་ནག།  
 stag sha ra zig (zhig) gi rtags red སྤྲུག་ཤ་ར་ཟིག་གི་རྟུག་རེད།  
 stobs ldan སྤོབས་ལྷན།  
 thang ga ཐང་ག།  
 thang ka ཐང་ཀ།  
 thang ta ཐང་ར།  
 thar 'bum ཐར་འབུམ།  
 the rgyal sman pa ཐེ་རྒྱལ་སྐམ་པ།  
 thub bstan ཐུབ་བསྐྱུང།



Tianzhu 天祝

Tongren 同仁

tshe ring ཚེ་རིང་།

tsha nag ཚ་ནག་།

tsha ri thang ཚ་རི་ཐང་།

tshe b+ha ཚེ་བ་ཁ།

tshe brtan ཚེ་བརྟན་།

tshe dbang ཚེ་དབང་།

tshe dbag rnam rgyal ཚེ་དཔག་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་།

tshe don ཚེ་དོན་།

tshe grags ཚེ་གྲགས་།

tshe kho ཚེ་ཁོ་།

tshe mo mkhar ཚེ་མོ་མཁར་།

tshe rdor ཚེ་རྡོར་།

tshe ring ཚེ་རིང་།

tshe ring mtsho ཚེ་རིང་མཚོ་།

tshe tshe ཚེ་ཚེ་།

tsho drug ཚེ་དུག་།

tshul khriims ཚུལ་ཁྲིམས་།

tsong kha ba ཚོང་ཁ་བ།

Tu 土

Tudeng 土登

wa mong ལ་མོང་།

Wang 王

Wuzong 吾·绒

Xiahalama 下哈拉玛

Xiahe 夏河



Xi'an 西安

Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an waiguoyu daxue 西安外国语大学

Xiaozhang 校长

Xining 西宁

Xunhua 循化

ya rdzi ཡ་རུ་འཛིན།

ya ru ཡ་རུ།

ye shes ཡེ་ཤེས།

Yi 彝

yi dam ཡི་དམ།

yuan 元

yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ།

yun nan ཡུན་ནན།

Yunnan 云南

Zhang 张

zhe dgu ཞེ་དགུ།

Zhiduo 治多

Zhou 周

zi ling ཟི་ལིང།

ziyou shichang 自由市场

zla ba ལྷ་བ།

zla sgron ལྷ་སྟོན།

zheng banzhang 正班长





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